

AN EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACTS OF RACE AND CULTURE ON THE TEACHING
OF ADVOCACY

by

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ABSTRACT

BARBARA A. MILLER. An examination of the role of race and culture in the teaching of advocacy in the high debate classroom. (Under the direction of DR. LILIAN BRANNON)

Research suggests that race and culture play important roles in the development of the school culture and have significant impacts upon academic success. In a teacher research project extending over the period of one year, the inquiry focuses upon the search for cultural identity, inter-cultural perceptions, and social responsibility.

Debate students explore a number of socio-political issues. Their responses are informed by the attitudes and values that they have developed over a period of time. In learning the skills of advocacy, these students are learning to develop voices that will resonate throughout their adult lives. Through discussion and reflective writing, this project examines the development of that voice and the social conscience that informs it.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Teaching advocacy is a sacred trust. Teaching students to skillfully write and articulate arguments prepares them to be powerful voices in the business place, the community, and the political arena. Therefore, it is important to examine how and what we teach our students as we prepare them to explore the controversial issues that abound in our complex society.

As teachers, we wield great influence because argumentation is an acquired skill. In the preface to his book, *Teaching the Argument in Writing*, Richard Fulkerson says "Effective argumentation is not a natural human ability but must be learned" (Fulkerson ix). Students acquire learned behaviors through direct teaching and through the subtler lessons we communicate in and out of the classroom.

At the beginning of the 1999-2000 academic year, I embarked upon a teacher research project that has made a profound impact not only upon my approach to teaching debate and the other skills that are a part of the forensics program I direct at South Mecklenburg High School, but also upon my personal world view.

The inquiry grew out of conversations with varsity debaters about success and failure in school. The varsity debate class is made up of students who have been in the program for at least two years. These students spend their class time preparing for competition on the national circuit

There is a sense of community in my Debate III/IV classes. I wondered out loud how this was accomplished. As in all of my lower level classes, there is an uneven distribution of talent and tournament wins. By the time students reach their third year in debate, success is measured by the skill improvements reflected in judges' comments on their ballots. Students read their ballots to one another and reflect upon the validity of their judges' criticisms. In this class the comments of their peers carry a great deal of weight. The trust that flows between students is evident in their willingness to seek the opinions of their peers and to process those opinions as something more than a validation of their own.

Looking at the student rosters of Debate III/IV classes I have taught over the past three years, I found that the homogeneity of the groups applied only to their attitudes. As a group, they were as culturally diverse as one would expect to find in any large urban high school at the beginning of the new millennium. With only one exception these students had found an easy niche in debate from their very first year. Their experiences contrasted sharply with many of the students in Debate I who could not find a comfort zone within the class.

The high school debate world is a distinct culture in itself. It has all of the required elements: its own language, icons, culture heroes, governing body, social order, and belief system. The members of this culture practice rhetoric to such a degree that they often become uniquely qualified to influence others long after trophies have fallen apart and their competition life becomes a distant memory.

Former debaters like Oprah Winfrey, Ted Turner, Jane Pauley, Hubert Humphrey, Lyndon Johnson, the late actor James Dean, and Rush Limbaugh serve to illustrate this point. At one time or another, each of these high achievers has credited their forensics experiences with influencing their attitudes as well as their career choices.

The increasingly diverse population of American schools adds to the challenges that teachers of debate already face. Before a student can objectively evaluate either propositions of policy or value, before a student can understand the subtext of a piece of literature for the purpose of oral interpretation, that student must have a clear understanding of the social, ethical, economic, and political motivations that drive human beings to act in certain ways.

My research began with an inquiry that examined how cultural diversity affects academic success in general and the culture of the debate classroom in specific. Since I have always

considered debate classes to be veritable marketplaces of ideas in both theory and practice, it is my belief that the classroom culture would be a microcosmic reflection of the social, economic, political and philosophical systems that make up the real world.

I was so focused upon observing and reflecting upon the student behaviors that contributed to the classroom environment that I began the research project without objectively reflecting upon one of the most important participants in the shaping of this particular universe -- the teacher. It was not until almost midway through the year that I discovered that the real focus of the project was upon the "baggage" that all members of

the learning community, including me, bring with them and how that baggage has a life of its own with an ability to either erect barriers or tear them down completely. This insight resulted in the research focusing on cultural barriers.

Several questions manifested themselves almost immediately. The answers to these questions formulated my research objectives.

The first focused upon the students who remained in the program throughout their high school career and the students who chose to leave after the first year. While one might expect a certain amount of attrition to occur in any elective program, I wondered how the unique culture of the debate classroom contributed to the choices students make. Why are some students easily assimilated into the classroom culture, while others become acculturated but not assimilated, and still others become completely alienated? Are there patterns that I had somehow overlooked?

In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose contemplates reasons for student failure to achieve. I found his observations thought provoking:

Through all my experiences with people struggling to learn, the one thing that strikes me most is the ease with which we misperceive failed performances and the degree to which this misperception both reflects and reinforces the social order. Class and culture erect boundaries that hinder our vision--blind us to the logic of error and the ever-present stirring of language--and encourage the designation of otherness, difference, and deficiency (Rose 205).

The second question focused upon how students learn. Since argumentation is not a natural skill, looking at how students learn could prove to be invaluable when developing teaching strategies. Is there a significant difference in the way in which

African-American, Latino Americans or White Americans process the information being taught? Are there regional differences that create barriers to understanding?

Finally, I turned to the course content. Since academic competition is an important component of this co-curricular program, are we trivializing the importance of the issues we examine? Are we teaching our students that in the game of life, winning is what counts? Are we teaching students to become powerful advocates of just causes or are we creating a new generation of Sophists?

Are we enabling students to distance themselves from the people who are affected by changes in policy? For example, when we consider whether or not the death penalty is morally justifiable, we are debating more than an abstract concept. Real men and women sit on Death Row. Real victims lose their lives. The issues we consider are more than challenges in an academic game. The men and women on Death Row are not game pieces.

I realized that my teacher research project represented a quest for truth. I also realized that it was not a new journey. There has been a plethora of research that examines the correlation between race, culture, and academic success. This body of research is essential in a democratic society. Ann Locke Davidson emphasizes the need for educators to continue such research:

School-based settings, as primary cultural arenas in which issues of diversity are enacted, thus structure and guide the meaning of social categories and the construction of ethnic and racial identities. The voices and experiences of high school students demonstrate the connections between identity and academic engagement, therefore demonstrating the critical need to consider school-based practices and processes in analyses of student action (Davidson 4).

The recognition of this critical need meant that my search for the truth would be taken out of the realm of the theoretical and be conducted within my sphere of influence--South Mecklenburg High School's room K-5. I would be taking a close look at my students' behaviors, but also coming under close scrutiny would be my own teaching practices and philosophy.

A Description of the Debate Classes

Three classes were chosen for the project. Two were Debate I classes and one was a Debate III/IV combination class. Debate I is a survey course in which all of the forensics events are introduced and students have an opportunity to experiment with any that capture their fancy. Debate III/IV students are preparing for the national circuit in a number of speech events.

The core events include three kinds of debate: policy, in which students consider possible changes in government policy to address a serious problem in the status quo; Lincoln-Douglas debate, which considers propositions of value, and legislative debate, an event in which students write bills and resolutions and defend them in a student congress format. Original oratory, extemporaneous speaking and oral interpretation make up the rest of the forensics curriculum.

All three classes were rich in cultural diversity. My first period Debate I class had thirty-four students. According to the official class list, twenty students were identified as white, ten students were classified as black, two students were listed as Hispanic, and the remaining two were listed as "other." Both of the Hispanic students were from Mexico.

Second period was much smaller. Out of the twenty-two students on the roster, twelve were listed as white, seven were identified as black, and three were classified as Hispanic. None of the Hispanic students were from the same country. One was born in Mexico; One was Cuban, and the other was from Nicaragua.

Out of the two Debate I classes, six students could be considered representative of the collective attitudes and behaviors of the majority of the novices who participated in the project. They are Carter, Melitha, D. J., Constancia, Margaret and Jared.

Carter, a fifteen-year-old white male, thinks of himself as a leader. He is a student who has been identified as gifted and talented, and Carter exudes self-confidence. His peers seem impressed with his air of maturity. He is unfailingly polite and eager to participate in class discussions.

Melitha, a fourteen-year-old African-American freshman, liberally laces her speech with slang expressions. Most of her classes are advanced, and her writing sharply contrasts with her speech. On essays submitted for a grade, her diction is excellent and her paper well organized. Although she is clearly capable of meeting the challenges of higher level classes, she refuses to move up. Melitha is sometimes confrontational and has behavior problems in other classes. In spite of these problems, she has a 3.2 grade point average.

D. J., a fourteen-year-old freshman is a black male who spends a great deal of his class time attempting to socialize with friends. He describes himself as being "down", one of the current synonyms for being "cool." His social behavior in the classroom prompted me to contact his parents during the very early stages of the project. Both are

business professionals who assured me that I would see a major change in their son's behavior by the very next class meeting. D.J.'s altered state was nothing short of a miracle.

Constancia, a sixteen-year-old sophomore, claims to speak little English. She was placed in my debate class because she registered late for school and there were few electives that remained open. She is shy and spends most of her time trying to avoid the teacher's notice. Even when I give her directions in Spanish, she shrugs her shoulders and tells me "No comprendo." Only once during the project did she respond in a way that revealed her true feelings, and in that one sentence response she also revealed a command of English I had not suspected.

Margaret, a white fifteen-year-old sophomore, appears to be neither shy nor suffering from low self-esteem. She believes in speaking her mind and says that even if her opinions offend, she is entitled to voice them. She has been in the Gifted and Talented Program since elementary school, and expects to be given preferential treatment in debate. She has asked to accelerate her level of competition from the local circuit to the state circuit since she is "smart and willing to put in the work to win."

Jared is a seventeen-year-old white male who took debate to "fill a hole in my schedule." A junior, he takes both advanced and AG classes. He dresses in clothing that call attention to his interest or participation in the Hip Hop culture. In casual conversation he affects the speech and mannerisms of that culture.

During the course of the project, the members of my Debate III/IV classes would provide useful commentary as the project developed. Discussions with this group tend to be open and relaxed, even when discussing topics upon which members of the group have opposing viewpoints. There is a great deal of diversity in the group, and yet the majority of the members remain a cohesive community.

Mary, a black senior, comes from an upper middle income Jamaican family. She is very bright and will graduate early. At sixteen she carries a heavy load of AG and AP classes. She began the program as a freshman, but moved to another state with her family during her sophomore year. During the time she was away, she attended a private academy. She returned to North Carolina for her senior year. Mary has a great deal of personal freedom and is very outspoken.

Darlene and Elise are seniors and identical twins. Their parents emigrated from Argentina and settled in Illinois, where their father established a thriving medical

practice. The family moved to Charlotte when the girls were five. Their entire school career has been spent in Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools.

While both girls are very quiet, they are different in their interests and in their competition choices. Darlene competes in legislative debate because it allows her "to choose when I speak and on what subject." Darlene competes in Lincoln-Douglas debate, where much of her success has been due to her analytical skills and her quiet, but deadly style of cross-examination. As seniors, both girls take a heavy load of AG and AP classes.

During in-class discussions, Darlene and Elise refuse to verbally participate. They communicate with each other in a kind of "twinspeak" that utilizes a minimum of spoken language but an impressive array of gestures and facial expressions. After three years with the twins, the class and I have no difficulty in understanding their positions on any given subject.

Malik, a black male, is an outstanding oral interpreter. A football player, whose size inspires fear on the field, he is equally inspiring as an actor. In his senior year, Malik has given up football in order to concentrate on his forensics career. He is interested in pursuing a career in drama.

In the classroom, Malik is irrepresible. He is filled with energy and is always constantly moving. The piece he has chosen for his last year in debate is a departure for him. It is cut from a book of slave narratives, and the characters could not be further removed from the angry black males he has always chosen to portray. Although he is AG-certified, Malik has chosen to take all advanced classes in his senior year. While his advanced courses increase his overall grade point average by providing an extra quality point, they are much less rigorous than the gifted classes for which he is certified. His father is ill, and Malik has some of the responsibility for his father's care.

Andy, a junior, is a thoughtful, intelligent white male. He sometimes portrays himself as the "class conscience", and is drawn to human rights causes. He specializes in extemporaneous speaking, commentary on current events. As do most of his classmates, Andy also carries a heavy academic load.

Audrey, a black female dancer, is a senior who cannot wait for the year to end. Although she has two AP classes, she has a relatively light load this year. While she often appears to be disengaged, Audrey is a gifted listener who can be counted upon to voice her opinion in any weighty discussion. Her opinions are always carefully considered and they are never offered in the heat of the moment. For this reason her classmates often consider hers to be the final word on a subject.

Members of the class call Billy "the Boy Wonder." He enjoys research and has some knowledge on a wide range of subjects. A white male, he consistently refuses to be drawn into any conversation that addresses race or religion. Politics, however, is a different matter. As a junior, Billy is on the school's math team and competes in Hi Q.

Carla, a sixteen-year-old white female, has a number of health problems. She often seems frustrated and unhappy, and has experienced conflicts with her peers and teachers this year. The 504 Committee has provided her with an IEP that is meant to help her to cope with her health issues. This committee provides individual education plans for students who do not meet the criteria for the Exceptional Children's Program, but still have special needs. In teacher conferences with her mother, several teachers have expressed the concern that Carla is using her disabilities to get out of work. A gifted orator, she competed only once during the project year. She has considered leaving South Mecklenburg to attend Central Piedmont Community College's High School Completion Program.

Eric, a white male, is one of the few students who have become intrigued with policy debate. This is the most time consuming of the events that our program offers. He carries a demanding class load, and in spite of the twenty hours minimum that he spends on debate, he maintains a 3.8 GPA. Eric is also a student assistant in my first period Debate I class, and is therefore in a unique position to observe their attitudes and behaviors.

Kara, a black female, is a sixteen-year-old junior who specializes in oral interpretation. She has not been very successful in competition over the past two years, but has shown steady improvement. She is hampered by her innate shyness. Quiet and thoughtful, it takes her longer to enter a discussion than it takes others in the class, but her opinions are often very insightful. She is well liked by everyone.

Bryan, a sixteen-year-old junior from Guyana, made a change from policy debate to humorous interpretation this year. He attributes this change to his increasing self-

knowledge. He explained that he chose originally policy because it he thought that it interesting, but that he later discovered in himself a real love of literature and an appreciation of humorous literature. He is bright and funny, and has a highly developed sense of humor. Often dismissed as a serious student because by his peers, Bryan has one of the highest SAT scores in this group of high achievers.

Katya, an eighteen-year-old Russian immigrant, is a senior. She has been in this country since 1991, and is not yet a citizen. She is bright and the most opinionated member of the group. As a senior member of the school newspaper staff, Katya has the dubious distinction of earning more letters to the editor than any other senior staff member. She is an excellent debater and represented our National Forensic league district at the national speech and debate tournament held in Phoenix, Arizona in June of 1998. Katya has political aspirations. When she declares that she will some day be an U. S. senator, no one in the group scoffs.

Crystal, an eighteen-year-old black senior, is the only member of the group with whom I have had a serious conflict. During her first year on the team, she was offended by comments I made about cigarette smoking. I was surprised by her reaction, and I chose to ignore the angry outburst that followed my discussion. Crystal considered this a callous dismissal of her right to disagree and exploded. The manner in which she articulated her displeasure brought about a suspension from the team.

After a cooling down period, we were able to discuss the incident. It had been a particularly stressful day for Crystal and she admitted that she was looking for a place to ventilate. We negotiated a penance that would be acceptable to both of us, and Crystal returned to the team. The group welcomed Crystal back. Over a period of time the incident was all but forgotten, and by the end of the year we were quite close.

During the year I would gain many insights through discussions with the students in my varsity class. Our relationship allowed them to freely discuss issues openly and honestly.

Bringing the Project into the Classroom

I was eager to begin. From the first day, I made sure that my students were fully aware of the research project I was conducting and of the role that they would play in that research. I began with a letter to the students:

Dear Student,

This year I am embarking upon a new adventure, an adventure that I hope will be as intriguing to you as it is to me. I am conducting my first teacher research project.

The project will focus upon the culture and curriculum of the debate classroom. The central theme will be relationships, both interpersonal and intercultural relationships. It will examine how these relationships affect our collective success and failure, and how they serve to shape our view of the world in which we live.

This class is a community, and although I am entrusted with helping the members of this community to become excellent debaters, interpreters of literature, and orators, ours is a collaborative effort. I will learn as much from you as you will from me.

As we move through this project, I will keep you informed of my findings. If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to let me know. I already have questions for you, and I am asking you to respond to them in a letter. Although we have only been together for a short while, what are your thoughts about this class? Are you comfortable with the issues we discuss? What do you enjoy most about the class? What would you like to change?

In your letter you may choose to answer the questions posed or you may choose to address something totally different. I am interested in what you feel is important for me to know. I am looking forward to reading your letter.

This letter began the project. Over the course of the year, I would ride an emotional seesaw. Examining student responses and analyzing my own would bring me both pain and the promise of a classroom environment that would make learning more accessible to all of my students. It wasn't until I was near the end of the project that I remembered a sermon that I had heard. The premise was based on a scripture in Hebrews and built around the premise that "out of a cloud if witnesses the truth is established." The participants of my project would reveal truths about the classroom culture I had helped to create, about the attitudes of the students and teacher who were a part of that culture, and about the social responsibilities of each.

Chapter 2: Methods of Inquiry

At the beginning of the project, I had no idea that I was embarking on a journey that I would come to thin of as the "trail of tears." It would call into question not only the attitudes and values of the students I teach, but my own as well. While self-discovery is informative, it can often be painful. During the year of research, my colleagues would become accustomed to keeping boxes of tissues on hand for the many visits I paid in search of solace and support.

South Mecklenburg High School has a large debate program. Students compete on both the state and national levels. Since I divided my time between teaching and working on the national speech and debate tournament our school system plans to host in June of 2002, I taught only three debate classes during the course of the research project.

High school debate classes examine social issues from a number of perspectives. The policy debater looks at foreign and domestic problems inherent in the status quo. Lincoln-Douglas debaters examine the deontological implications of public issues, and speakers who prepare for extemporaneous speaking as a competition event analyze current events. Even the oral interpreter addresses real world issues, since an understanding of the social context enables the performer to go beyond the words and offer the audience a glimpse of the rich subtext that gives meaning to the spoken word.

An examination of social issues is essential to the teaching of debate. However, my students do not come to the class uninformed. The sum total of their experiences has helped them to formulate a worldview, and it is this worldview that resonates throughout the arguments they develop, throughout the analysis they offer as truth, throughout the characters they bring to life in oral interpretation.

While a focus on social issues is singularly appropriate to the debate classroom, it is also appropriate to all other classes. In *Social Issues in the English Classroom*, Hurlbert and Totten explain:

It should be readily apparent that in a republic such as ours, instruction about social issues and/or for social consciousness and social responsibility should not be the sole concern of one curricular area as it often is (e.g. the social studies class). Aside from the simple but profound fact that such issues truly cut across the curriculum, it is also true that such concerns are simply too important to leave to one curricular area (Hurlbert 31).

In identifying the objectives for this research project, I spent some time in reflecting upon my own philosophy of teaching. Through a review of journal entries I have made over the past few years, I realized that my philosophy revolves around my belief in the active participation of all students in the learning community, my belief in the need for opportunity and support, and my belief in the teacher's role as a human rights leader. Indiana University professor Marsha Heck supports this philosophy:

I propose that educators at all levels of public and private education must be active human rights leaders in part because knowledge is power, and everyone but the most extremely marginalized in the U.S. have at least a short term experience with some form of education, and because children are the future of any nation. Educators have distinct opportunities, not to indoctrinate, but to facilitate individual and communal action, perception, and reflection regarding human rights and responsibilities in contexts that are meaningful and relevant to their children in their classroom (Heck 2).

From the beginning, I involved my students in the project. I discussed my own personal philosophy and asked them to reflect upon their own attitudes concerning membership in the learning community.

In order to establish a frame of reference for later observations regarding assimilation into the classroom culture, I asked Debate I students to write a reflective essay on their reasons

for taking the course. I would re-read these many times during the project. I wanted to know what the students' expectations were when they entered the class so that I could better understand whether or not those expectations were being met.

Several responses are typical of those I received from students in my novice classes. For example, Carter, a highly motivated sophomore, focused upon his need for challenging classes and his desire to become a lawyer. Since many debaters share this aspiration, this was nothing new. Neither was his interest in having debate on his transcripts: "I am a college-bound student who likes to learn. Debate will look good on the transcripts I send to colleges and I am willing to put in the effort to be successful."

Melitha, an African-American freshman, voiced many of the same sentiments. She was optimistic about her competition future:

I intend to take debate all through high school. I like to argue and plan to get really good at it. I have a friend at West Charlotte [High School] who is on the debate team, and she travels all over the state. I am looking forward to the travel and the competition.

The tone of D.J.'s reflection was almost flippant. It consisted of just one sentence: "I took debate because I like to argue and because 'I'm the man'." Like Melitha, D. J. was a black freshman.

Margaret, a white sophomore who is very active in a number of school activities, expected to do well in debate. Her self-confidence was apparent in her response:

I took this class because I am interested in learning to argue well. My first experience with debate was in middle school, and I found the discussions enjoyable. I have been active in drama both here and in middle school, so I have already had some experience in public performance. I plan to try out for Children's Theater this year, and I expect to have a successful audition. I would like to become a part of the travel team this year and I hope that you won't consider me the average novice.

Constancia came into the class after it had been in progress for over a month. Her reason for taking the class was made apparent by a note from her counselor. The note explained that Constancia spoke little English and that there was nowhere else to put her.

Jared, a white junior, was also placed in the class by Student Services late in the semester. The official explanation was that Jared had a hole in his schedule that needed to be filled and that debate was the only class available that period. The unofficial reason was the conflict Jared had experienced with another teacher.

2.1 Questions of Cultural Identity

As an English teacher, the canon of literature is the natural place to begin an inquiry into cultural influences. I began by asking my Debate I students to do a focused freewrite about the literature they study. With one exception, they wrote about what the literature they were currently studying or about a favorite novel, short story or poem. Melitha's letter was different:

Dear Ms. Miller,

I don't feel like writing about literature because I don't get anything out of it. I didn't get anything out of it last year, and this year is no different. I am not dumb or lazy; I just get sick of reading stories for and about white people. The only stories we ever read about black people are stories about them being slaves or something about Martin Luther King,

Jr. We read some African things, but even these don't seem relevant to my life at all. Everybody just thinks it's "interesting."

When I think about all of the literature I've read since middle school, the stories about black people don't have anything to do with real life. If I didn't know any better, I'd think that the only black man who ever did anything was Martin Luther King. I respect him and all, but I want to know about more than that.

I am in an advanced class, but I still don't learn about anything I'm interested in. I do my homework and I do okay on the tests, but I'm not learning anything. English is boring.

This was not surprising to me. Over a period of time I had heard complaints of this nature from other African-American students. Until our debate program grew so large that I began to teach forensics courses exclusively, I had taught American literature to eleventh graders. The question of cultural relevancy surfaced every year.

I was eager to discuss Melitha's letter with her. As an African-American, I understood her frustration, and as an English teacher I understood the benefits of a broad-based curriculum. I shared the experiences I had growing up in a world in which the doctrine of multiculturalism had not yet become a concept.

I had expected Melitha to consider me an empathetic ally in her search for identity. Instead, I found that she saw me as a part of the power structure that was unwilling or unable to provide a more inclusive literary experience for the school's culturally diverse population. I saw that I had been naive to believe that she saw me as being different from the teachers who had frustrated and disappointed her. In our conversation about the letter, I discovered that in Melitha's eyes I shared the ignominy of my colleagues:

You ain't no different, Miss Miller. You just think you are. Let me give you an example. When you teach values, you quote all them white

philosophers. Now I know there got to be some black philosophers somewhere.

I later reflected upon her comments. There is a wealth of research that illustrates the importance of literature in the shaping of identity. The national literature becomes a powerful socializing tool, providing voices that speak to both the past and the present and projecting our collective hopes, dreams and frustrations into the future. As a part of the on-going criticism of American educational institutions, researchers are taking a close look at notions of power and identity. Researcher Ann Davidson says:

Identity can be conceptualized as a process that develops in a matrix of structuring social and institutional relationships and practices. Presentations of self, ranging from resistance to assimilation, are linked not only to minority status and perceptions of labor market opportunities, but also to disciplinary technologies, serious speech acts, and other factors as the institutional level. Because schools participate in negotiating the meanings students attach to identity, the ways in which teachers and schools handle power and convey ethnically and racially relevant meanings become relevant to the conceptualization of students' behaviors (Davidson 5).

I was determined to change Melitha's mind about my attitude. Her viewpoint was the exact opposite of the way in which I saw the classroom environment. I envisioned it as a type of oasis in which students could quench their thirst for knowledge of the real world, exchange ideas in a non-threatening atmosphere, and develop a mutual respect for one another.

Various metaphors have been used to describe the educational setting. Instead of the oasis I envisioned, these have become increasingly negative, as public opinion becomes critical of school systems' attempts to narrow achievement gaps and find substantive ways to achieve equity. In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose suggests that

the metaphor offered by educational researchers Cohen and Neufeld is appropriate to the conclusions drawn through his own research and experience:

"The schools," write social historians David Cohen and Barbara Neufeld, "are a great theater in which we play out [the] conflicts in the culture." And it's our cultural fear--of internal decay--of loss of order, of diminishment--that weave into our assessments of literacy and scholastic achievement (Rose 7).

As I compared the two metaphors, my classroom as an oasis and the Cohen/Neufeld description of the classroom as a theater of conflict, I realized the oasis represents the goal I would like to achieve. It represents a source of replenishment and a respite. However, during the year of painful discovery, I came to understand that the theater of conflict was closer to the daily reality of the class and that what I had been seeing before I took a closer look was actually a mirage.

One of the most important aspects of the classroom research project would be the student voices I encountered. The voice that resonates in the tone of the writer or speaker requires an objective listener. I thought many times about what Cohen and Neufeld suggested about our cultural fears. In my heart of hearts, I knew that this fear included my own fear of relinquishing too much control to my students. I was willing to "listen" to them and to reflect upon the messages they conveyed, but at this point in the project I had not yet ready to allow those messages to overwhelm my own voice. I had not yet realized that when I invited my students to become the proverbial "cloud of witnesses", the truth I encountered might include their perceptions of me as well as those about themselves.

Having begun with student letters about the literary canon, I decided to open up a discussion in all three classes on American literature. I returned the reflective letters they had written to me, asked them to spend a few minutes reading my comments and then writing down anything they would like to add or questions they might like to ask.

My comments to the students were in two forms. The first were questions I asked in the margin. For those students who wrote that they were satisfied with the anthologies they used in their classes, for example, I asked whether or not they felt that they were truly representative of all Americans. For those who were dissatisfied, I asked them to think about the voices that were absent and how these silences affected their learning. My second comment was a statement asking each student to think about America as a great tapestry whose design is constructed of threads of many colors and textures. My purpose was not to provide answers, but to encourage deeper thinking about the body of literature that shapes so much of our sense of identity.

After it became apparent that most of the students had finished, I asked if anyone would like to share. Carter's hand shot up at once. He told the class that his letter focused upon the importance of reading good literature, and read a part of his letter to the class:

Studying literature may not seem important to all students, but we learn from the stories we read. We learn about history and the ways people thought a long time

ago. Present day literature will be like a time capsule for people in the future. It will tell the next generation what we were like.

As would become her custom over the course of the year, Melitha did not wait for an invitation to respond. She raised her hand immediately, and without waiting to be recognized, began to speak:

What you mean by the "future generation will know what we were like? You mean they gonna know what white people were like because that's all we ever read about -- white people.

Carter seemed taken aback by Melitha's comments as well as by the sarcastic tone in which they were delivered. In contrast, the tone of Carter's reply was conciliatory:

Melitha, all of our literature books include just about everybody. I agree that there are more white writers in them than anybody else, but there just weren't a lot of other people around in the early days and the ones that were here weren't writing. Now more minorities are getting published. It's not like they're being ignored.

After awhile it became apparent that the rest of the class had dropped out of the debate, leaving Carter and Melitha to champion opposing viewpoints. The class was divided between those who thought that we should forget the past and appreciate the changes that have been made in the last decade to include all cultures in literature textbooks. The discussion in my second period Debate I class seemed almost a replay of the one that had taken place first period.

It was a relief to open the discourse in my third period class. This was the varsity class and we had learned long ago to discuss controversial issues without bloodshed. The earlier classes were audiotaped, but I had decided to videotape the varsity discussion. Even though the class discussion was being videotaped, the students appeared relaxed. I began the discussion by talking about American literature in general:

Miller: The canon of literature is the body of works that a society validates as exemplary and culturally representative. Until fairly recently, a number of cultural groups have been excluded from the body of literature that appears in most of the anthologies we use to teach American literature. Research suggests that the reason for this is that white males have traditionally dominated publishing. Not only have minorities been underrepresented, but you will find far fewer women writers. I want you to think about the importance of stories. Stories are really very powerful. We learn about our history, our culture, and our place within the society itself through the stories that are told. Okay, when you think about the literature you have studied what do you learn about yourself?

Katya: Well, actually I learned a lot from it. Now you guys all know that I'm Russian, so I don't exactly expect to find a lot of stories [in American literature anthologies] about Russian immigrants, but a lot of what I know about American culture comes from reading about it. I mean, I read other things about American culture than textbooks, but I learn a lot from the books we read in class. (After a short pause) Okay, Miss Miller, I wasn't going to say this -- Come on, you guys, you know how I am and I feel that I just have to say this. Okay, so everybody didn't get included in the literature books. So what? I'm tired of all the whining about equality. Being left out is a thing of the past anyway. It doesn't have anything to do with today. I mean, the literature books we have now have almost everybody in it. I've read lots of black literature and my little sister that's in middle school reads literature about almost every culture you can think of. Things have changed and people need to stop whining about the past and just get over it.

Crystal: Okay, it's easy for you to say "get over it," but what about all of those people who never had a chance to learn anything about their culture because the textbooks didn't include them. Okay, Katya, I might agree with you that there is more about other races and cultures in the textbook than there used to be, but there still isn't all that much. Think about it. How many stories are in there about Native Americans or Hispanics or Asians? Come to think of it, I can't remember reading any Hispanic writers at all in my American literature class. There have been one or two pieces in there, but my teacher said she was concentrating on the really important writers and skipped right over them.

Miller: I want to share two things with you. When I was growing up back in the days when dinosaurs roamed the Earth, I never read one piece of literature in elementary or junior high school that was by or about an African-American. I did read some Langston Hughes and Richard Wright in high school, but even those pieces were passed over quickly and were not required readings. I was fortunate that I had parents who had a personal library filled with books about black people. The second thing is the way I felt whenever I saw a movie that had black characters. They were almost never main characters. I remember how embarrassed I used to be by the black people I saw in movies and even on television. They didn't seem like anyone I'd ever met.

Eric: Well, I think that literature and films are important, but I have to agree with Katya that there is too much focus on the past. This just divides people. It doesn't draw them together.

Katya: I couldn't agree with you more, Eric. All of this looking back at the past is just whining about things you can't change.

Kara: Why do you keep calling it "whining?" Don't people have a right to know about their past? I want to know about the things that black people went through

and about the lives they lived. I don't think that saying that our heritage is important is whining.

Crystal: You need to find another word, Katya, because I don't think that you can call it whining. Everybody has a right to learn about their culture in school. But I'm black too, Kara, and I care about my heritage, but I have a lot of other ways that I can find out about it. I mean, back in Miss Miller's day they sure weren't teaching a lot of black writers, but she knows a lot about African-American history and about black literature. People who are interested in the past can go to the library, look on the Internet. I mean, nothing is ever going to be perfect, so if you want to find out about your culture, it's your responsibility to find the information.

Miller: Okay, I agree that there are other resources available, but doesn't any society that calls itself democratic have a responsibility to all of its members? Stories not only inform us about our individual places in society, they help all of us to understand one another. The omissions in our anthologies speak as eloquently about what we value as the pieces that are included. Let me share something with you: I remember the first time I read Elie Wiesel's *Night*. The stories he tells about his experiences during World War II made me weep. But even more importantly, they strengthened my personal resolve to actively struggle against injustice.

Those stories are important and it's important that the society validate that importance.

Katya: I know, Miss Miller. It's all really sad, but it's still in the past. We can't keep thinking about these things over and over. Look, I'm Jewish myself and I know how sad it is. I know that a lot of people died, but nothing we do can bring them back. We have to get over things. It doesn't have anything to do with today. That was a long time ago, and it was a terrible thing, but we have to live for now. Looking back doesn't help anybody. It just keeps things stirred up.

Andy: I don't think that what happened during the Holocaust is unimportant, but I think I know what Katya means. Looking back in the past just divides people more. I mean, I'm a white person and I don't have any prejudice toward anybody; I get along with just about everybody. But the minute we start talking about what happened in the past, about slavery and stuff like that, everybody just gets mad. I didn't have anything to do with it, but I have people right now who will just look at me as some white boy and be mad at me for no reason.

Audrey: Andy, I don't look at you as some white boy. I don't think about people that way, but I don't think it's whining to want to know the stories of my people. I want to know where we came from and what we thought about things. Stories are more than just history. They show you how people lived. History just tells you a bunch of facts. I want to know they were heroes too, and if they were cowards

sometimes, I want to know that. I want to know the circumstances and how they felt and what they went through. Maybe the reason it stirs people up is because they aren't used to hearing it and because all they ever hear is European explanations of what happened.

The twins offered no commentary, but the look they exchanged after Audrey's comments spoke volumes. Three years with them both in class and at debate tournaments told us that their raised eyebrows and nodding heads indicated that this had been an important discussion and that they had been engaged by it.

Later, I reflected upon the discourse that had taken place. I was surprised to find that students who were experienced debaters made few connections between past events and present problems. Their competition success indicated that they understood the necessity of using empirical evidence to support their analysis of current socio-political issues. Katya, for example, had debated on the national circuit for two years and had represented our district at the national tournament held in Phoenix, Arizona as a junior. However, they failed to see human history as a continuum.

Marsha Heck identifies this attitude toward the past as a major area of concern. As a college professor, Heck uses civil rights videos to help facilitate an "inclusive world view" in her students. It is their reactions to these videos that brings about her concern:

Many are unaware of the U.S. Japanese internment camps during WWII. Surprised Texans do not know that Felix Longoria, who died serving the U.S. during World War II, was buried in Arlington National Cemetery because Anglos in his hometown of Three Rivers, Texas refused burial to Mexican Americans. Others are shocked to learn that civil rights marchers were beaten and attacked with fire hoses (Heck 8).

I was disappointed at the lack of insight inherent in my students' comments about the past. I had spent a great deal of time with these students and had found them to be caring, sensitive, and passionate about social issues. Still, they had dismissed feelings of cultural alienation as "whining" and the death of six million innocent people as past history. They had suggested that by opening a conversation on the past, one risks peer rejection and outright hostility.

This inability of young people to view history as a continuum clouds their vision of current events. In order to break a pattern of behavior, one must first perceive that such a pattern exists. In her article "Improving Ethnic and Racial Relations in the Schools", Harriett Romo says:

Many patterns of racial and ethnic group relations in our schools are based on the ways that members of a given racial or ethnic group have been included or excluded within American society. These patterns suggest that we cannot understand present day group relations without considering slavery, the discrimination faced by Southern European immigrants, the conquests of the Indians and Mexican Americans, the relocations of Japanese citizens during World War II, and the experiences of Cuban and Vietnamese refugees and other recent immigrants (Romo 1).

In addition to the concerns raised by the failure of my varsity students to see the relationship between discriminatory practices in the past and current social problems, I was also concerned about Andy's comment that being white often invites undeserved hostility.

Carter raised this concern again after an angry exchange between him and Melitha a few later. The Debate I classes had spent a week preparing for their first legislative debate. The resolution they had chosen required students to choose an affirmative or negative position on the abolition of the death penalty. Carter defended the death penalty by arguing that even if it were not a deterrent, such an extreme sanction symbolized the unwillingness of the society to tolerate certain crimes.

During cross-examination, Melitha asked Carter if he were aware that there were a disproportionate number of minorities on Death Row. Carter's response was:

Even if most of the people on Death Row were minorities, they wouldn't be there if they had not committed a crime that was pretty serious. You can't tell me that it should make a difference whether someone is black or white if they kill somebody.

Melitha: You just saying that because you white and you just don't care. I'll bet if it was white people who were going to Death Row more often than black people, you'd have a different attitude.

I intervened at that point and reminded everyone that the purpose of cross-examination was to allow time for questions only. I also reminded them that *ad hominen* attacks were not permitted, even if phrased as a question. Since it was almost time for class to end, we tabled the debate until the next class period and students wrote a reflection on the congress session. Carter's reflection addressed Melitha's comments:

Something has to be done about Melitha, Miss Miller. She won't let me speak even when we are having regular class discussions. She doesn't even listen. Every time I get up to speak, Melitha attacks me. I hate to say this, but I think that she is really a racist. While she hasn't come right out and said it, she is always accusing me of being a racist, but she doesn't ever look at herself that way. Any comment she makes to me always has something to do with the fact that I'm white. Don't I

have a right to be a person? People can't expect me to feel guilty about slavery and the Indians and everything else that happened before I was born. I just want to be myself. I don't want to be attacked because of my color any more than Melitha does.

In looking at the problems inherent in our multicultural society, it is easy to identify those who fall victim to our notions of the racial "other." However, the challenges that face white children are rarely considered. The search for identity is not limited to minorities.

2.1 The White Boy's Burden

Jared is a white student who assumes the mannerisms and speech patterns of his black peers. His clothing and diction identify him as a member of the "Hip Hop Culture." The majority of his friends are black. Melitha dismisses him as a "wannabe", but he ignores her comments. He always argues from the minority perspective on any controversial social issue. He says that he identifies with blacks more than he does with whites.

In "The Struggle to Define and Reinvent Whiteness: A Pedagogical Analysis", Joe Kincheloe discusses the problems that white students in America experience in the new multicultural world. In discussing students like Jared, he refers to a study on whiteness conducted by George Yudice in 1995:

George Yudice feels uncomfortable with what he considers the easy renunciation of whiteness and the privilege that accompanies it. Whites alone have the privilege of proclaiming themselves as non-raced. But no matter how vociferously they may renounce their whiteness, white people do not lose the power associated with being white. (Kincheloe 8)

Jared often states that he never thinks of himself as white, that he feels more connected to the African-American male who make up his clique. It is interesting to note, however, that Jared expresses some frustration with the identity he has constructed for himself. It is equally interesting to note that many of his peers, both black and white, are uncomfortable with Jared and are easily offended by his language and mannerisms.

An example of the effect that Jared has upon both black and white students first surfaced during a session of student congress. Student congress features the kind of legislative debate that is done on the floor of the real United States Congress. This was the first speech that Jared had given in class. After the first speech, students have the option of either asking a cross-

examination question or giving feedback to the speaker. Feedback must focus upon the positive aspects of the speech, and the kinds of comments that students should make are modeled for them over and over before the first congress session.

This was the second day of congress and several students had spoken before Jared. The class had followed the format without incident. During the three minutes allowed for comments or questions after each speech, students had given positive feedback or asked mostly clarification questions. Since it takes time to develop confidence and since the judges who write tournament ballots can be brutally frank, I stressed the importance of positive criticism from the "home team."

The supportive tone of the classroom critiques all but vanished after Jared's speech. In spite of all the time we had spent on diction, Jared had chosen to deliver his speech in the ebonicized language he favored. As soon as he finished speaking, almost every hand went up.

During the ensuing discussion, Melitha accused Jared of being a "whigger," a term with which I was unfamiliar. Later I found that this was a particularly derogatory term made up of the words "white" and "nigger."

Margaret's hand waved insistently. She had been the first speaker, and her speech had been carefully crafted and well researched. No one in the class had been surprised. In class discussions, it was apparent that Margaret took debate as seriously as she did her other activities. However, Margaret's air of superiority earned her few friends in the class. She had spoken with me several times about the "jealousy" of her classmates, and explained that this was the reason that her critiques might not be as well received as those of her colleagues. She asked to be exempted from the class critiques, On this, the very first day of critiques, she decided to lay aside her reservations and respond to Jared's speech.

You apparently don't take anything seriously, Jared! In a student congress
Speech you're supposed to make the very best word choices, not sound like some
illiterate street person.

Her critique angered some of the black students in class who felt that this was directed toward the nonstandard dialects they were struggling to translate into the formal language required for legislative debate. Her explanation did little to improve the way in which these students were processing her comments. By way of clarification she explained: "What I mean is that Jared doesn't have to talk that way. He just does it because he thinks it's cool. Well, I don't think it's cool at all."

While Jared's behavior seemed to anger Margaret, a quick look around any high school campus will show that it is hardly unique. Focusing upon the phenomenon, Kincheloe again turns to George Yudice to explain the response of other European-Americans to whites that adopt the characteristics of other races. Stating that this is often viewed as a defection and that the whites that exchange their own culture for that of another are seen as "race traitors", he quotes Yudice as saying:

It's as if some race traitors wanted to disconnect with all liabilities of whiteness (its association with racism and blandness), while maintaining all the assets (the privilege of not being black, Latino/a, or Native American (Kincheloe 3).

His analysis of Yudice's argument says that there is "a certain amount of disingenuity" associated with white renunciation, since they retain their whiteness in spite of the cultural rejection they claim through their behaviors. He warns that these renunciations impede efforts to fashion progressive white identities.

Stephen Haymes is even more critical of the tendency of mainstream whites to take on the traits of other cultures. He agrees with Henri Lefebvre's comments in his 1990 book, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. He quotes Lefebvre as saying that "the commodification of language and culture, objects and images are torn free of their original referents and their meanings become a spectacle open to almost infinite translation" (Sleeter 108).

Haymes says that this "consumership" is fed by the "white racist imagination" that values otherness for its entertainment value and exoticism. He suggests that it is both the cynicism of a white-dominated marketplace that feeds what he describes as the "white mainstream consumption of the 'other' as a kind of tourism. Of the marketing ideology that acts as an impetus for this phenomenon, he says:

For example, Levi's blue jean ads attempt to make middle-class white youth identify with Levis jeans by using a "street cool" motif, which romanticizes the ghetto. Underpinning this motif "is a conception about acting in public spaces and how blacks accomplish this." [a quote from Robert Goldman and Steve Papon's 1999 "Levis and the Knowing Wink" in *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* Volume II] Suggested is that "black males move without inhibition to the rhythm of the street: they signify soul, movement, expressiveness, the body unencumbered by tight, stiff middleclassness" [ibid.]. Also, accompanying the street cool motif is Levi's exotic appropriation of black urban music to signify sexual pleasure and desire. Black music is used to express the physical sensuality and movement associated with jeans. Thus, by stylizing the black ghetto, Levi ads create a mood that mobilizes desire in such a way that middle class white youth come to identify Levis blue jeans with sexual provocativeness (Sleeter 109).

Kincheloe argues that with all of our collective efforts to create school cultures that validate and nurture all ethnic groups, we have created an increasingly uncomfortable environment for white students. By associating whiteness with blandness and contrasting it with the daring sensuality associated with other cultures, we have contributed to the confusion of white youth in search of identity.

Adding to the problem are the uncertainties associated with our changing demographics. As recent demographic shifts indicate, these students face a future in which those currently identified in terms of the racial "other" will be in the majority. Kincheloe suggests that white survival is dependent upon the ability to redefine whiteness:

The reinvention of whiteness operates outside any notion of racial superiority or inferiority, as it seeks to transverse the terrain of the netherlands of transitional identity. While it confronts white tyranny directly, it avoids the projection of guilt on to white students. In the process it generates a sense of pride in the possibility that white people can help transform the reality of social inequality and reinvent themselves around notions of justice, community, social creativity and economic/political democracy (Kincheloe 5).

Kincheloe's vision of reinvention is in line with my own vision of a positive school culture. It is my hope that through an examination of those socio-political issues that divide, we can fashion a collective culture in which notions of brotherhood and social responsibility became possibilities for the future.

As the year wore on, I realized that this is a formidable goal. Instead of drawing my students together and raising a heightened sense of community and justice, my students appeared to be drifting further apart, polarized by the cultural baggage they brought into the classroom with them. It would be a long journey to Utopia.

Even getting my students to accept the idea of white students having issues to confront in a culturally diverse environment seemed an insurmountable task. To minority students struggling to achieve a positive identity and to overcome the historical burdens they see as the only legacy of "the white man," the mere utterance of such a thought suggests ignorance and insensitivity on the part of the speaker. The first time I introduced this idea,

Melitha responded: "You been brainwashed. You got so much education [that] you can't even see the truth."

This conclusion seems less unreasonable when one considers that white students themselves often have difficulty in entering a conversation regarding the impacts of our efforts to teach critical multiculturalism in the nation's curricula:

When confronted with the despotism of the white norm and the brutality of white racism, many white students have encountered great difficulty dealing with such revelations. Many white students have reacted negatively to such teaching, not so much out of disbelief or rejection, but out of frustration as to what to do with their new knowledge. Without a vision of racial reinvention and support for the difficulties it entails, such students had nowhere to go. Their frustration in this context often turned to cynicism and a descent into nihilism. The importance of an anti-racist, positive, creative, and affirmational white identity in this pedagogical context cannot be overstated (Kincheloe 6).

In reflecting upon Kincheloe's comments and upon the student attitudes I had encountered, I realized that the issues that divide are often those that we fail to confront, and it is this lack of courage that keeps the barriers in place. The desire to be politically correct often leads to a focus upon appearances rather than upon moral correctness.

Consequently, we treat one another gingerly, fearful that honest discourse may reveal some nasty conflict lurking just beneath the surface of our polite smiles.

These rituals of manners cannot conceal the real issues in the debate classroom. We are fortunate in that silences are not permitted; Attitudes and values are voiced, scrutinized, and challenged. We learn early on that conflict resolution is often difficult, but the search for solvency is a part of the eternal quest for truth.

I constantly revisited the artifacts that had been collected to support my inquiry. I re-read letters, listened to tapes, watched class videos. I began to realize that finding strategies that would bind us together as one community of learners would not be easy. The conversations I opened seemed to drive us further apart, not bring us closer together. It was a particularly bleak winter as I struggled with a personal illness and the evidence that spoke to me of failure. The friends and colleagues with whom I discussed the project all wished that they had bought stock in Kleenex. I cried a lot.

One day after reviewing during lunch the tape on which Melitha had referred to Jared as a "whigger", I was particularly depressed. My varsity class asked what was wrong. Without showing it to the class, I explained the contents of the tape. Malik had an immediate response to the use of the term "whigger:"

Malik: (laughing) Okay, I know that you guys are just waiting to hear what I'm going to say. You know I got lots to say about this because I know a lot of "whiggers." Okay, Ms. Miller. We all know what a sheltered life you've lead, so I'm going to enlighten you. (general laughter) Now a "whigger" is what you call a white boy who wants to act black.

Andy: Come on Malik. You can say the word. Miss Miller's not going to write you up.

Malik: You know I can't stand that word. I don't even like to say it in a joke.

Andy: Are you serious? The name of your piece from last year was "Nigger," and you loved the way the title would shock the judges. Don't

tell me you can't say the word. You said it every time you competed last year and every time you rehearsed in here.

Malik: That's different. That was a competition piece and it was saying something important. This is something that people say to be insulting. No matter how people try to ignore it, nobody really likes anybody who is pretending to be something they aren't. And that applies to people like _____. I mean, it's not like I don't like him. He's cool, but the way he tries to act black just gets on my last nerve.

Audrey: What about black people who try to act like they're white? You know what I mean, Ms Miller. All their friends are white; they only date white people. What about them?

Mary: I hope you aren't talking about me because I have friends who are both black and white not to mention Bryan. Nobody really knows what he is and nobody cares. I hope it's not because I'm dating _____ (a white student.)

Audrey: Now, Mary you know that I wasn't talking about you. Although, now that I think of it, I do seem to remember those blue contacts you wore all through your freshman year. (general laughter)

Mary: (without rancor) And they looked good on me too.

Miller: Okay. I have a question for everybody. I've been doing some reading for this research project, and I've found a lot of research that suggests that white kids are also having a hard time finding a positive identity. What I mean is that with the trend towards taking a critical look at history and everything, they have to find a whole new way of looking at the world. Looking back has got to be painful for many of these kids. What do you think?

Malik: And you want us to be sympathetic about this? It's not like they don't still run everything. Okay, I know how I sound and it's not like I hate white people or anything. Everybody in here knows that's true. But don't ask me to feel sympathetic because they feel guilty or something.

Andy: See, that's exactly what I mean when I say that people think that all white people are the same. Well, I'm not and I'm sick of everybody thinking that we have something to feel guilty about. I didn't oppress anybody and nobody can answer for their ancestors. My friends are all just people I can get along with. They come from all cultures. I mean, even my girlfriend is Korean. So why do people look at me like I'm some kind of bigot from the Dark Ages? Even Malik lumps me in with everybody else when he talks about this and starts getting mad, and we've been friends since fourth grade.

I had no answers for Andy and at the time I did not know that I would be asking the same questions about myself a short while later. I had no idea that the research for a time would veer away from considerations of my students' attitudes and instead would spotlight my own. Melitha's charge earlier on that I had been too "brainwashed" by my education to "see the truth" would bring further tension to the classroom.

2.2 Earning the Right to Be Myself

Melitha's offhand remarks about my failure to see the minority perspective soon became a litany. It was fueled by a confrontation that occurred in the classroom between me and a student who had come to class unprepared. She was scheduled to give a speech that day and since she had professed extreme nervousness about speaking in front of the class, I had allowed her to postpone her speech. This was the last day on which she could earn a performance grade, so her readiness was a serious matter.

I called on her first, as I had told her I would. She said that she had forgotten to bring her speech. I reminded her that this was the last day of the quarter and asked if she would like to confer with me about the matter after class. I was totally unprepared for her response: "Why you wanna embarrass me in front of all these white kids. They know you gonna give me a zero. I'll bet if it was one of them, you wouldn't be so hard. I told you I was nervous."

The incident would have remained a minor one, had Melitha not chimed in: "You know Miss Miller isn't gonna cut you no slack. You black." I was shocked and embarrassed to find that two other black students, including D.J. joined in. I realized that had it not been for the urgent protests of the student voices still needing to be heard and graded, this could have escalated into a really ugly situation.

As my students left the classroom, I asked the young lady to have a paper bag conference with me at her earliest convenience, and we quickly agreed upon a time. I held paper bag conferences in a location away from the classroom during lunch. These conferences often solved minor problems and eliminated the need for parental or administrative intervention. Sharing lunch made the atmosphere more relaxed.

On the appointed day, I was dismayed to find that she had brought Melitha with her. I told them that while I was willing to meet with both, Melitha would not be a part of the primary conversation. When we had finished talking about the incident, I would invite Melitha to join the conversation if her friend agreed and Melitha remained civil.

As always, I allowed the student to speak first. She spent some time on concerns about her grade and about her shyness. She reiterated her accusation that I had embarrassed her in front of the white students in class. She then handed me a letter she had composed, explaining that she did not feel comfortable just talking about it. I asked her if she wanted it read aloud, and she said that she preferred that I read it while she ate. She waited patiently while I read, but never opened her lunch bag.

Dear Miss Miller,

I am real worried about my grade in here. I try to do everything everybody else does, but I'm real shy. I don't like to get up in front of the class because I know that everybody is going to criticize the way I talk. And I know that you are going to criticize the way I talk because you don't talk like no black person I've ever heard and you want everybody else to sound just like you. I hate the way your voice sounds. You always sound like you trying to be white. I haven't never heard you say anything that sounds black. That's why you get along so good with the white kids in here. You don't sound no different. I'm not trying to be disrespectful or nothing, but I know a whole bunch of black kids in here who can't stand the way you talk. When I found out that I had a black teacher for debate, I couldn't wait to get in this class. But it's just like having another white teacher because you don't seem black to me. You might be black on the outside but you just as white as any of these other teachers on the inside. I hope you don't get mad at me and I hope you will give me a chance to make up my grade, but you told me to be honest.

I was so stunned by the contents and the tone of the letter until I found it difficult to respond for a few minutes. I looked up to see Melitha watching me intently, and I knew immediately that she had already seen the contents of the letter. Scanning it again quickly, I realized that she had probably done some editing because the grammar was better than I had

expected. Melitha's writing always showed the sophistication of thought and expression that she refused to show in her verbalizations in class and she was clever enough to limit her editing.

I had held many paper bag conferences with students over the years, and almost always the student and I were able to negotiate a peaceful resolution. I had the feeling that the underlying assumptions that drove this conflict would require more than could be accomplished in thirty minutes. Melitha's parting comments validated this insight:

You are always so into whatever you're talking about until you don't notice the way we feel about you. Oh, I'll admit that the white kids and the "wannabe white kids" all like you because you sound like them, but the rest of us can't stand the way you are. I'm not trying to disrespect you, but you're always asking everybody to be completely honest, and this is the way I honestly feel.

Since there was no time left, we agreed to meet again within the next few days to continue the discussion. They both agreed.

I was devastated by the idea that African-American students saw me as a phony. I had cried many times during the course of the research project, and now I could feel the tears gathering at the corners of my ego. Why couldn't students accept me as I am? What was so offensive about my language that it caused students to form such a negative opinion of me?

My friends and colleagues had become accustomed to my weeping in their offices. Fortunately, one of them pointed me to Shirley Brice Heath's work, *A Way with Words*. Heath's ethnography of life in two communities in the piedmont region of North Carolina would serve as an eye opener for me and provide answers to the question of different learning styles and how they influenced students' perceptions in the classroom.

Heath's research addresses the way in which children learn to use language in two communities, Roadville, a white working-class community, and Trackton, a black working-class community. It identifies the barriers to learning inherent in the different learning styles practiced in each community.

As a relative newcomer to North Carolina, I was unfamiliar with the culture of the Piedmont. Growing up in upstate New York and California, my experiences were vastly different from that of many of the students I teach.

I had received mild comments about my language in the past, although they were usually limited to questions about my origins or statements suggesting that it was difficult to understand my speech. These questions and comments came from both black and

white students, however. As I thought back, I realized that students from northern or western states had little curiosity about my speech.

As I read Heath, I thought about a conversation that I had recorded at the beginning of the project. The conversation with Crystal and Malik came at the end of a tape on which we had recorded Malik's oral interpretation of Arna Bontemps "A Summer Tragedy." The cutting reminded Crystal of her grandparents in Rockingham, North Carolina. When I listened to it later, I was glad that I had forgotten to stop the tape after Malik's performance ended.

Crystal: You know what, Malik? That piece sort of reminds me of my grandparents. They live in Rockingham and I spend almost every summer down there with them.

Malik: Come on, Crystal. This piece is about a couple of old people getting ready to commit suicide. How could that remind you of your grandparents? You know what, Crystal? Everything always reminds you of somebody.

Crystal: No, Malik; I'm serious. My grandparents talk just like those people in "Summer Tragedy."

Malik: Yeah, right! I've heard both you and your mama talk and neither of you sound anything like those people in the story. Your mother couldn't be more proper if her life depended on it.

Crystal: Hmmp! You should hear my mama when she's mad. You haven't ever heard my mama when she's mad or you wouldn't be saying that. She changes on you! See she works in banking and people expect you to sound a certain way when you have a professional job. I sound so proper in all my classes, but when I go visit my grandparents in Rockingham, I talk just like they do.

Malik: Hey, Miss Miller. I got a question to ask you.

Miller: Okay, what would you like to ask me? Because if you're going to ask me whether or not I believe Crystal, I do. And I think it's wonderful that she's so sensitive.

Malik: Nope, that's not what I was going to ask you. I know a bunch of people who'd like to know the answer to this one: When you're at home, you don't talk the same way you do here, do you?

Miller: Well, I'm far less formal, if that's what you mean.

Crystal: (interrupting) Un-unh! I've met her whole family, Malik, and they all talk that way from the youngest to the oldest. Even the kids talk that way. You remember when we took Miss Miller's nephew, Brandon, to Boston with us? Well, I hope you remember that he talked just like the rest of them and he was

only three. And doesn't her granddaughter, Gabby, sound just like Miss Miller? If I call Miss Miller at home and Gabby answers, I always think it's Miss Miller. I'm telling you, Malik, she talks that way all the time. All of them talk that way.

Although Crystal, Malik and I enjoy a close, positive relationship, language is still something of an issue. In reflecting upon this conversation, I realized that language is an important element of culture with serious social and political implications.

Crystal is particularly articulate. She is a member of National Honor Society, Beta Club, and a host of other scholastic and service organizations. She is a powerful speaker and was one of our students invited to participate in the prestigious Barclay Forum Invitational Debate Tournament hosted by Emory University.

While I have always been impressed by Crystal's dedication to academic excellence, I was even more impressed by her insights regarding the social uses of language. Far from allowing language to act as a barrier between her and her grandparents, she exercised the kind of flexibility that revealed both the high regard in which she held her grandparents and the positive sense of self she had achieved.

While Crystal has achieved equilibrium in the balancing act that most minority students must master, there are other students who trip over the barriers they encounter and fall. These barriers are both internal and external.

In order to understand the perspective of African-American students who saw my language as coldly artificial, I had to look at the power structure that exists in any school. I realized that in the eyes of those students who feel alienated from the power structure, I am fluent in the language of the oppressor. Sheila Macrine, an assistant professor of education explains:

The growing diversity in our classrooms urges transformation of ideological perspectives and changes in social, cultural, and institutional relations. Dominant ideologies and classroom practices have functioned to serve only one segment of our society. Attention must be directed toward determining social environments and relations that best fulfill all students' needs (Macrine 5).

While I agree that schools are representative of power structures that already exist within the status quo, such an acknowledgment raises questions regarding empowerment? How do alienated students gain power? Researcher Richard Ruiz makes the observation that language and power are inter-related:

Subordinate minority groups are those who are named and defined by majority groups. Consider that most ethnic minority communities in the United States are known by names not of their own choosing. "Asians" and "Hispanics" are lumped

into categories that deny the distinctiveness of the groups they comprise. American Indian nations are distinguished by names ("Papago" or "Stockbridge", for example), but those names generally are not the ones by which they refer to themselves. And when groups do try to define themselves, when Mexican Americans become "Chicanos", when Negroes become "Blacks", or Blacks propose for themselves "African-Americans," --there is resistance, not just because of the inconvenience and confusion created for the rest of us, but because of a deep-felt sense that this sort of self-definition by these groups lack legitimacy: who has given them the right to change their name? (Sleeter 218)

The question of self-naming also brought to mind another troublesome thought. Over the past several years, I have taught African-American students whose names are radically different from that of the Janes and Natashas, Tracys and other more familiar names from past class lists. I have inwardly shaken my head over the unusual spellings and the difficulties these spellings created for me as I called the roll the first time. As I struggled with these names, was I inadvertently undermining my students' self esteem?

It is always painful to consider ways in which we may have inadvertently made mistakes that may have worked against the lofty goals we set for ourselves as teachers. It is always my hope that I am promoting growth in my students, and objective analysis sometimes shows that hope is not enough.

Perhaps the real answer is to provide opportunities for self-discovery and self-validation. This calls for a willingness to look at socialization patterns that are different from the ones with which we are personally familiar.

One example that comes readily to mind is associated with the rebukes I had received from Melitha and her friend. As I looked back over the transcripts that I had made of our discussions and other artifacts I had collected, I saw how many times they had assured me that their comments were not meant to be disrespectful. In reading about the socialization of young women in Trackton, I found that "fussing" was a community-condoned activity for women. Heath describes these verbal exchanges

They fuss at and with each other in a series of assertions and counter-assertions related to a specific incident or personality. Fussing exchanges take place between individuals of different age and/or status relations (Heath 97).

This is considered appropriate behavior and is directed not only toward women, but also toward men and children. When they become adults, they are not allowed to fuss with "older women or individuals of high status in the community (98)." However, looking at the way in

which disputes are handled provides some insight into the kinds of exchanges that have taken place between Melitha and me.

I opened a conversation with my students about the ethnography I had read. It was interesting to note that many students recognized the behaviors Heath describes and offered examples from their own experiences. I was able to share differences in my own upbringing in New York and California and I realized that we were moving toward mutual acceptance of our differences.

After reading Heath, I found that handling disciplinary matters with Melitha and several other black students became easier. Like most teachers, I relied upon indirect commands: "Please continue reading. We need to remain focused." However, Heath describes a much more direct approach by the parents of Trackton children. By adding the kind of direct commands they used to my arsenal of disciplinary measures, I became much more successful at maintaining an orderly classroom.

Over a period of time we had many discussion about language, mine as well as theirs. We talked about regional differences, about formal and informal language, and about the need to have access to both. We talked about the richness of various types of language. Finally, we talked about acceptance of language different from our own and the fact that if students expected me to hear and appreciate their voices, they would have to accept the legitimacy of my own.

In retrospect I realize that since success in competitive speaking is often dependent upon the speaker's command of formal language, I had directed my energies toward changing my student language. I had done so without allowing them to discover for themselves the need for change. Consequently, my intent was lost as well as the message that language usage can not judged in terms of rightness or wrongness; it can only be evaluated in terms of appropriateness to a given situation.

The issue of language is an important one because it is such a major part of one's cultural identity. In talking with my varsity students and with former students who had been successful in the program, I found a great awareness of the social implications of language. A former student, a well-spoken male who had enjoyed great success on the national debate circuit said:

I was always so precise in my speech. Judges liked that. There were a lot of times when I wondered if people would like me as much if they knew the real me. I always felt as if I couldn't relax, like I always had to be on guard. I got so sick of people telling me that they forget that I'm black

because I don't sound like most of my peers. I mean, I really found that kind of insulting. They liked me because I was different from other black people, because I was more like them.

Sheila Macrine agrees with this former student. In discussing the struggle to achieve of black students and other minorities, she says that they "have to learn cues and have middle class experiences in order to have school success:

To be successful, multicultural students must transform cultural struggles to coincide with rules of existing institutional arrangements. In other words, the multicultural student must appropriate the ways of the dominant culture in order to survive. Indeed, the current American educational system serves primarily only to prepare middle-class children to participate in their own culture (Macrine 6).

I thought about my own education and my efforts to find a place of my own within the school culture. Like my former student I was often thought to be atypical of other members of my ethnic group. In working to establish an environment in which race and culture enriched rather than divided the collective classroom culture, I had to not only recognize the influences that worked powerfully upon these students, but also the ones that shaped my own reality. I had long ago come to terms with the forces outside of my classroom, but by finding ways to confront the prejudices within the classroom, I felt that I had indeed earned the right to be myself.

Learning to accept oneself is particularly difficult in our society. This is illustrated by the reflective freewrite that Bryan, a varsity student asked me to read:

Most people don't know what ethnic group I'm in, and I never talk about being from Guyana. It makes it much easier for me to stay loose and gives me a wider choice of friends. Some people who get along really well with me think that I'm Indian, and I don't ever tell them that I'm not. I don't lie about it or anything; I just don't tell them any different. The only thing that really bothers me about all this, though, is that nobody really expects me to be smart except for the people who think I'm from India. Even teachers!

Especially those who think I'm Hispanic! You should have seen how shocked some of my teachers were when they found out how high my SAT score was. Those were the teachers who didn't think I was Indian.

2.3 A Message from the Borderlands

I was struck by Bryan's remarks, and concerned about his perception of those teachers who believed him to be Hispanic. I had already observed that while most of my students were willing to write reflectives and engage in the many discussions on racial identity and school

culture, the majority of the Hispanic students had very little to say. With only two exceptions, these students attributed their lack of participation to language difficulties. Even when invited to write in Spanish, their responses tended to be brief and somewhat impersonal. Constanica's response to a question regarding her self-perception as a member of the debate community is typical:

I don't speak English very well. I get along with everybody and do my work. I like this class.

I knew that Constanica had a much better command of English than her writing suggested. She was articulate in Spanish and I had asked her to help another Hispanic newcomer who had limited proficiency in English. I stopped translating instructions, and found that Constanica had no trouble in understanding them and then translating them into Spanish for the newcomer.

Late in the second semester, all three classes began preparing for the district elimination tournament. Districts is the qualifying tournament for Nationals. Even though the students in my novice classes had little chance of competing in this tournament, all of them would have a chance to debate the legislation that would be used to qualify students for the national student congress.

In second period I appointed Constanica to the committee. I knew from our private conversations that she was fluent in English, but shy. I thought this would give her an opportunity to participate without the pressure of being a solitary speaker.

I was surprised when the docket was submitted to me. The first piece of legislation was a resolution to curtail illegal immigration from Mexico. I was even more surprised to find that the selection of the first piece on the docket was by unanimous decision. The legislation read:

A Resolution to Decrease Illegal Immigration

Whereas, there is an increase in the number of illegal immigrants from Mexico,
and

Whereas, illegal immigrants place a significant burden upon the social and
economic resources of American communities, and

Whereas, illegal immigrants circumvent the normal protective measures taken by
the United States government to assure that persons emigrating to the United
States are physically, economically, and morally fit

BE IT RESOLVED by the Student Congress here assembled that a permanent
wall be built between the United States and those borderlands identified as

providing easy access to the United States and that Border Patrol agents be empowered to shoot to kill any illegal alien crossing a clearly marked "No Man's Land" between Mexico and the U.S.

I was shocked at the solvency clause included in this resolution, and was extremely grateful that the originator was not a member of my team. Nevertheless, it had been submitted for debate and the Ways and Means Committee had selected it for discussion. I was surprised to find that several students readily took an affirmative position. The first speaker was Carter:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I firmly support this resolution. While it might seem shocking at first, there are two levels of analysis that support my position. The first is social, and the second is economic. When we first look at the resolution, we may think that the idea of shooting someone who is only looking for a better life is a terrible thing, and it is. But we are not talking about just one poor family or about one or two people who are trying to better their circumstances. We are talking about literally hundreds of thousands of people pouring into our country without documentation.

We have a lot of poor and homeless Americans already. There are only so many resources available. When you think about welfare payments, food stamps, free lunches and the other social services these people receive, you begin to understand that it decreases the benefits to our own citizens. Even hospitals are not allowed to refuse services to these people. What we are talking about here is the duty of the country to its own citizens, and when you think about the conditions that exist, you see that there is already a life and death struggle going on.

Since these immigrants are not here legally, some of them support themselves through criminal activities. This puts American lives at risk once again and puts a strain on a criminal justice system that's already overburdened.

We have been trying for many years to turn the tide against illegal immigration and so far we have been unsuccessful. If we want to stop it, we must be willing to take more extreme measures. Remember that these people still have a choice. Let's just make sure that they know that the choice will be between quality of life and life itself.

Carter's speech was fairly representative of the other affirmative speeches. All of them attempted to justify the summary execution of illegal immigrants on social and economic grounds. While there were an equal number of negative speeches given, it was Hispanic students gave none.

At the end of classes that deal with controversial and emotional issues, I ask students to spend a few minutes on written reflection. They have the option of sharing the reflection or

keeping it private. Constanica chose not to share the one line she had written with anyone but me: "When it was Germany, everybody thought the people trying to cross from East to West were heroes."

In a later conversation, Constanica talked about the pain she had experienced in finding that her classmates considered Mexicans so expendable. She said that she knew that there were differences between the situation addressed in the resolution and the situation in Germany during the Cold War, but that everybody forgot that the real reason people wanted to go to the West was a better life. They were not making political statements.

Although we had addressed a few months before the observations that Ruiz had made in his research regarding the naming of ethnic groups in America, Constanica showed her attentiveness to the issues we discuss by referring to these observations now:

You know everybody thinks of Hispanics as just one big group. There are kids in this school from a lot of different countries; they aren't all Mexicans. But they put us all together. They don't think of us as coming from different places.

For Hispanic students of various nationalities, assimilation into the school culture presents many difficulties. Part of this has to do with the general tendency to think of all Hispanics as members as a homogeneous group.

Most of the research focuses on Mexican-American students since they represent the largest group of Hispanic immigrants. John Ogbu drew a number of conclusions from a 1986 field study he conducted on Mexican-American students' search for identity:

The community's established interethnic structures of domination and subordination are changing, thus providing a complex, multifaceted, interactive context in which students learn the significance of what it means to be "Mexican" and thus "different" from others. This context exerts a powerful influence not only on what students learn but on what they do with that knowledge, on the opportunities they have to acquire and apply socially valued knowledge, on how they see themselves today and tomorrow and on the value they place on schooling in getting them from today into the future.

In a school system actively seeking to provide equity for all students, helping them to recognize the common rights of all people is not an easy task. All through the project, I would find instances in which debaters had distanced themselves from the people affected by the issues under discussion. The debate revolving around Mexican immigrants was an example of the phenomenon I came to think of as "distancing."

I decided to try an experiment. In a session of congress that occurred near the end of the school year, I reintroduced some of the legislation that we had considered during earlier sessions of congress. One of the pieces selected was a resolution on the death penalty:

Whereas, statistics show that there is a direct correlation between racial and socio-economic status and death penalty sentences, and

Whereas, statistics also show that fewer women are awarded the death penalty for crimes similar to those for which men receive the ultimate sanction

BE IT RESOLVED by the Student Congress here assembled that the death penalty be abolished as a violation of the right of U.S. citizens to equal treatment under the law.

The class meeting before the debate, students drew from a large fishbowl. The fishbowl contained a personal legend. The legend provided each student with an identity that was different from his or her own. The following are examples of the kinds of legends students might receive:

1. You are an African-American from an upper middle-income family. Both your parents are professionals. Dr. Huxtable is an obstretician and your mother, Claire, is a corporate attorney.
2. You are homeless and currently reside in a public shelter. You have no resources other than those provided by a social services agency.

The purpose of this exercise was to help students to view the legislation from a perspective other than their own. I was disappointed in the results of the first debates. Students were unenthusiastic about the experiment. I reminded them that their identities were assigned in the same way in which it was in real life, by luck of the draw.

At the end of the semester I asked students to write an exit essay reflecting on their experiences in the class. Almost every letter addressed the research project. Two were particularly memorable. The first was from Carter:

This has been a tough year for me in many ways. I was forced to think about things that I don't usually like to think about, or if I think about them at all, I'm pretty sure about how I feel. This year was different. I haven't changed my mind about some things. I still believe in the death penalty, but when we did the legend experiment, I started thinking about the way it's carried out. I was a homeless person and I started thinking about what would happen if I really were a homeless person. I realized that I probably wouldn't get the same kind of representation that someone with money would get, and that I might be executed even if I'm innocent. It surprised me that I still believe in the death penalty, and when I think

about it it's not the death penalty itself that's wrong. The Bible says "an eye for an eye", and that's the way I really feel about it. What's wrong with it is the way it's carried out. That's a different issue. The other thing that I almost can't believe is that I found myself agreeing with Melitha about something. I was surprised that she listened to me talk about the death penalty without interrupting the way she would have a few months back. I can't see us becoming friends or anything, but at least we're listening to each other.

The second letter was from Billy "the Boy Wonder", a varsity debater:

Dear Miss Miller,

I know that you wondered why I never had anything to say in all those discussions we had about the teacher research project. You've asked me about it many times, and although we've talked about a lot of other things, I've never entered the discussions about the project. I just wanted to tell you that I listened to everything and I thought about everything, but you are always so passionate about the project until I'd end up thinking to myself that to offer an opinion that was different might mean I'd have to debate the best debater in the class - you.

I found both these letters to be very powerful because both had to do with my ultimate goal of a classroom environment in which all voices are heard and respected. In the first letter I had found that this was not an impossible dream; In the second I found that it is the community voice that counts, that I am not that voice; I am just one of the witnesses to whatever truth we find together.

Chapter 3: Discussion

Throughout the teacher research project, I had considered three areas of concern: the search for cultural identity, the effects of culture on learning styles and social interaction within classrooms, and the development of social responsibility in the teaching of advocacy. At the end of the project, I had not answered every question to my satisfaction; I had not effected a significant change in the classroom culture; I had not formulated a plan to save the planet.

I had, however, learned a great deal about the value of teacher research. Essential to personal and professional growth is a willingness to call into question one's own beliefs and practices, as well as those of others. Taking a critical look requires an unflinching courage, and presupposes a desire for positive change.

As Henry A. Giroux points out, student voice is also an "important aspect of critical pedagogy" (Hurlbert 313). In looking at my relationship with the students I teach, I realized that there was much that they could teach me. This required careful listening, however, and hearing the voices that were familiar as well as those that were unfamiliar to me.

Helping students to develop their own voice is an important element in the development of a democratic class culture. As an English teacher, I am familiar with the power of stories. As a teacher of oral interpretation, I must enable my students to find the social issues embedded in the literature they perform. Samuel Totten says of literature:

Stories (both nonfiction and fiction) are at the heart of the English curriculum and they should be at the core of any study of social issues, social consciousness, and social responsibility. As for the power of literature (and the possibilities of its use in the study of social issues, especially the concept of social consciousness), Greene (1982) has argued that "one of the functions of the arts and humanities--beyond the enlargement of vision they make possible, beyond the pleasures they provide--is to provoke self-reflectiveness, to help us recover our lost spontaneity--to be present in the first person in the world Another is to nurture wide-awakeness, the capacity to attend, to search, to transcend (Hurlbert 32).

Teaching students to debate social issues is a difficult and painful task. However, I feel privileged to be a part of the struggle to develop a sense of social responsibility in our students. In Totten's discussion on social consciousness and social responsibility, he quotes

remarks made in 1990, by Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching:

Educators are often confused--even abused--if they try to examine touchy social problems and to help students debate what constitutes the common good. Yet to ignore controversial issues is to offer students an incomplete education, and in capacity to think carefully about life's most important concerns. I am convinced that even in matters where society is sharply divided, schools have an especially important role to play, one that goes beyond silence or the extension of the status quo.

If we hope to make progress toward resolving deep conflicts in the culture, we must encourage open and sensitive classroom discussion about choices, even in such controversial areas as sex, drugs, cultural differences, and religious beliefs. . . And in the guidance of such inquiry, teachers must be trusted.

If we postpone such involvement for students while they are young, there is a good probability that it will be deferred for a lifetime. Clearly citizenship is not something to be deferred. It should be demonstrated in every institution in which the student is involved, especially at school.

In spite of the pain that was my constant companion during much of this project, I was also left with the sure knowledge that next year I would do better. Research is an on-going activity. Out of the project came a host of unanswered questions. Some of these deal with ways in which to use the ethnographic information I have obtained to make the classroom environment more inviting and ways to put the knowledge students bring with them to better use.

I have come to realize that students do not come to me as blank slates. They have already developed a worldview based upon their prior experiences. This worldview includes their attitudes toward learning, toward future opportunities, toward one another.

Sleeter describes the knowledge base of students:

Students' cultural knowledge was rooted in their own concrete experience and reflected what was real to them. Collective separation from the adult world was a reality they experienced every day. Dividing their time between events under their own control and events controlled by others was also a reality they experienced. School knowledge usually concerned matters removed from the students' own existence, and came to the students by way of adults in verbal form without concrete analogues the students had experienced (Sleeter 64).

If we are to become human rights leaders, we must help our students to bridge the gap between their own experiences and expectations and the learning we are providing in the classroom. We must also establish the relevancy of such learning, and assist our students in finding their place in the continuum of history.

In a conversation with my varsity students at the end of the year, I was asked how I felt the project turned out. I had to admit that I did not feel as successful as I had hoped to feel, that the research had shown me that if I were to receive a report card that evaluated my success as a teacher that year, I would certainly not have straight *As*.

I had begun the year with confidence. The previous spring I had been a finalist in the Harris Teacher of the Year awards, and my name had been included in *Who's Who Among American Educators*. At the end of the teacher research project, I felt that these honors had been premature. While I appreciated these honors, I felt that I had not yet earned them. While I did not say these things to my students, they knew how I felt.

Perhaps the most significant benefit that I personally received from the project was data that would both help me to improve my own performance and create an environment conducive to open discourse and reflection. Many voices have informed the conclusions I have drawn. Some were accusatory; some were supportive; all were heard.

Our debate program hosts an annual farewell dinner for graduating seniors. It is always an emotional affair at which Debate II students give farewell speeches about each of the seniors. This year was no different.

Novices are invited to the farewell dinner, and every year a few of them come. I was surprised to see Melitha among the guests.

At the end of the program, Katya asked if she could have the attention of the group for just one more speech. I was surprised to find that the speech was about me. At the end of a beautiful speech, my seniors surprised me with a plaque. The plaque thanked me for the lessons I had taught them, both the lessons about debate and the lessons about life. Even now I cannot read the plaque itself without weeping. The handwritten card that accompanied it simply said, "Because you try." I mention it because it represented the hope that through research and new strategies based upon the analysis of that research; I would be able to reach the classroom goals I had set.

I was blessed with a second ray of hope. As we were leaving the restaurant, Melitha turned to me and said: "Don't think that this means that I like you or anything, but I did sign up for Debate II."

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