

Their View—My View:
A White Teacher's Quest to Understand His African-American Middle
School Students' Perceptions of Racism

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Problem Statement

Introduction – Personal Background

Since entering the teaching profession as a white male two years ago in my mid-thirties, I have been surprised by the degree the issue of race has affected my teaching experience. Before teaching, I had spent much of my life working in social causes involving people of color and I do recall race or racial tension being an important factor in the work. However, since becoming a teacher and having the responsibility of teaching 90 students a day in an urban middle school in Oakland, (who are predominantly students of color), I have found the issue of race to be very significant in my relationship with my students. How race affects my relationship with my students has motivated me to undertake a study of how African-American students perceive me as a white male teacher and how the students feel race affects our relationship. Before describing the specifics of my study, I want to provide the background of my entry into the teaching profession and how the issue of race has come up in the classroom.

White Male Identity and the Culture of Power

During the summer of 2001, before the start of my teacher credential program at Mills College, I was assigned to read Gloria Ladson-Billings' book *The Dreamkeepers* (1994). I was inspired by the title of the book and was eager to read it; however, I recall there were parts of the book that disturbed me. In reading her description of effective teachers of students of color, I detected a view that white men were not welcome into the teaching profession. Upon rereading the book for this research, I do not see where exactly Ladson-Billings writes this, but somehow I got that impression. In the book, Ladson-Billings profiles several exceptional "culturally competent" teachers and describes their methods of teaching African-American students. In my first reading, I recall that all of the successful teachers she described were women and were mostly African-American. At one point she describes a white male student teacher who has had an unsuccessful experience teaching students of color. Before this, I hadn't remembered feeling that being a white male could potentially be a liability as a teacher, but I began to feel it could be. I had entered teaching knowing that there was a dire need for teachers and I felt I was answering a call to save kids in inner city schools. Was it possible I wasn't needed? Could I be part of the problem as opposed to being part of the solution? I was glad when this issue came up in a credential class discussion of the book. Our African-American teacher stated she didn't think that Ladson-Billings' intention was to imply that the teaching profession didn't need white teachers, but rather she was making the point that teachers needed to connect to the culture of their students.

Over the course of the credential year, honestly speaking, I regularly felt unease and discomfort in reading authors who addressed or attacked "the culture of power." Being a white male, I sometimes felt these authors were directly attacking me. I wondered if I had been a beneficiary of so much privilege. Being only one of five white males in a seminar class of 60 students, mostly women, I sometimes felt I was "the enemy". I thought about expressing these feelings and perhaps I did indirectly, but I also was able to listen and absorb. I felt these authors were pushing my buttons and were forcing me to look hard at my own beliefs, which was a positive thing.

Looking back, I think that the discussion of race and white dominance in our credential program was part of a larger goal of preparing us to be effective teachers in racially and culturally diverse inner city schools. Despite my many years of working in racially diverse communities, I realized I hadn't deeply investigated my own racial identity and how I might have benefited from white privilege. Maybe this is why I reacted so strongly to some of the class readings. When I told certain friends of color outside of my program about my studies, they expressed surprise that I hadn't ever explored this topic. I also recall a discussion during that year of the need for whites to move beyond guilt and become advocates for people of color. This statement confused me as I wasn't sure how to move forward; I did feel guilt about being a member of the culture of power. I also felt nervous that I might in fact be racist when I had thought I wasn't. I recall a day-long retreat where our credential faculty spoke to the students about their own racial and ethnic identity and how it impacted them as teachers. It was truly interesting to hear the white faculty talk about their backgrounds (which is a rare thing). It modeled bringing the discussion of race out into the open.

Being Called a Racist Teacher

While grappling with my own exploration of my racial identity during my credential year, I was entering the classroom as a student teacher. In the second half of the year, I was given the responsibility of taking over a two hour class of Seventh Grade English and World History in a diverse urban classroom. Not surprisingly, I was quickly challenged in the area of discipline and several students regularly challenged my authority. One day when I repeatedly asked one African-American student to stop talking during a silent reading period, the student responded, “Man, you are a racist!” Her comment stung me especially in light of my ongoing inner exploration in my teacher training program. Later, I discussed this incident with my cooperating teacher and she reassured me that she felt I had not done anything wrong. She mentioned she thought some students used this allegation against white teachers aware the power of this accusation. I was unsure how to respond to the student’s allegation. I felt the student was using this word unfairly, but it was not something I could easily brush off.

First Year Teacher

This student teaching experience prepared me in some way for my first full time assignment in a 7th grade classroom in Oakland, California. Early in the year, I again experienced tension in my relationship with my students, especially those who were African-American. Some of these students felt my treatment of them was racially motivated and let me hear of it. The tension occurred mostly when I would punish students for not following the classroom rules (giving them detention or sending them to the office). It shocked when the students responded with anger and defiance and felt so vehemently mistreated. There was a huge gap between my impression of how students had acted and the students’ impression of their own behavior. (This created quite animated “he said-she said” conversations at the administration and parent level). The students would either deny their wrong behavior and/or accuse me of enforcing the rules unequally with all students. I interpreted this as a strategy students used to take authority away from me in the classroom and escape responsibility for their actions. Again, however, it was hard to brush off the accusation that I was being racist. A white male teacher colleague told me he handled these situations by saying, “if a student in my class calls me a racist, I tell them to immediately go down to the principal’s office with their evidence and ask that I be fired. If I’m racist, I shouldn’t be teaching here.” He said the students would become stymied by this because they did not have substantial evidence and they would stop their comments. He also felt this forced students to face that their accusations were unreasonable.

My Class - My Study - Context of Study

In my second year of teaching 7th grade at the same school in Oakland, I was determined to improve my classroom management techniques and reduce disruptive behavior. I did feel that many of the discipline problems I encountered in my first year were related to my inexperience in teaching. As has been said in many a classroom management workshop, when a middle school student senses a lack of structure, he/she will be quick to exploit it. Yet, in the back of my mind, I recalled my previous year’s

experience with African-American students and also wanted to improve my relationship with them. I felt this tension between needing to be more hard and soft simultaneously.

As we moved through the beginning of the year, I felt the overall environment in the classroom was more controlled and positive, but there were still many discipline problems. Again, I noticed many of the problems occurred with African-American students. I was particularly concerned with one class of thirty students. Sometimes, at the end of class, almost half the students' names in the class were written on the board for bad behavior and ten or more students would have earned detention. In one theory, I thought I was inconsistently enforcing the classroom rules and acting alternatively "hard" and "soft". In addition, I questioned my ability as a White male to be an effective teacher for African-American students and other students of color. I vividly remember days where I felt the students were "ganging up" on me and acting as a group to "sabotage" and disrupt the class. I compared these situations to a captain facing a mutiny on his ship. In a narrative describing one of these "bad days" with this class, I wrote:

I feel the blood pumping in my head as I sense the mutinous sentiment rise in the room. Students (all African-American) are criticizing me left and right. "You're doing too much." "You're hecka (very) scandalous." "You can call my house, I don't care." "You're always putting people's name on the board for no reason." "I hate this class. I'm getting my classes changed." I feel I must stay calm and not get too emotional. I feel I must stand up for myself. Can't they see that they are the problem, not me? "You know," I say, "you may enjoy treating your teachers this way, but I am here to teach you all to learn, and I don't understand why you would want to treat someone like this who is here to help you."

My response in this situation on that day did cause the students to calm down and consider their behavior and the tension was diffused a bit. In these tense moments, however, I felt there was a racial element to the tension. I wondered if the African-American students were attacking me because I was a white male. Certainly by their behavior they were making a statement about how they felt about what was happening in the class. For the practical and person reasons, I am curious about those tense days. In a later book, Crossing Over to Canaan (2001), Gloria Ladson-Billings describes a beginning African-American male teacher and his struggles to teach his diverse students to write. She writes that this teacher, when faced with an unsuccessful classroom, decided to work on himself and his approach rather than trying to fix the students. He ends up inventing creative ways to engage "unsuccessful" students more in the curriculum. Ladson-Billings calls this "reflective practice," where teachers respond to the feedback students provide (directly and indirectly) and work to tap into their students' strengths (Ladson-Billings, 2001). In light of Ladson-Billings' perspective, one reason for the opposition I encountered from the students was that they were not buying into my class. I needed to rethink what I was presenting to them.

From the perspective of reflective practice, I could have focused my study on reworking my classroom curriculum to try to more engage the African-American students and recorded the results, but that is not the direction I chose. In thinking of my interactions with African-American students, the charge of being called a "racist" was loudly ringing in my ears. I was drawn to follow up with them directly and find out how they found me racist. In a classroom where the students were highly engaged in the curriculum, there would naturally be fewer discipline problems and fewer situations of

teacher-student conflict (this is advocated as the best classroom management technique in general). In that scenario, the students might not then label me as racist. However, as a second year teacher in the process of developing engaging curriculum, I decided to probe more deeply into the issue of racism. The issue of discipline and fair treatment of students of color is complex. I notice that most of the students who receive detention and other punishments from me are African American and Latino; but, I feel I am only responding to their behavior. Noticing the trend, I can see where it makes sense to them that I would be discriminating. Thinking of this beyond the meting out of consequences for negative behavior, I feel that race is an obstacle in the development of a positive relationship with my students of color, and African-American students in particular. I would like to understand more why this is an obstacle and what can be done to overcome it.

My research question became, “How do my African-American students experience and define racist behavior by me as their white male teacher?”

Literature Review

Scholars, teachers, policy makers, and many others acknowledge and have sought to address the disproportionate lack of success of students of color in United States educational system. Much has been written and many solutions have been posed to improve the educational performance of students of color.

One predominant theory espoused by scholars (Ogbu,1986; Delpit,1995; Tatum,1997; Ladson-Billings,1994,2001) to explain the lack of success is that students of color face a gap between their own culture and the culture of school. The gap emerges at the earliest phases of school where students’ pre-existing knowledge is not honored in the school environment and students are “set-up” to fail. Students of color end up behind white students at the earliest stages of school. These authors argue that the public school system in all of its aspects: its history, its curriculum, its administrative and teaching staff, represents the values of the culture of power (i.e. white dominant society). Students of color therefore feel a conflict between their home racial and ethnic identity and the identity that is required to be successful in school. Ogbu (1986) writes:

Involuntary minorities have persistent rates of school failure and social adjustment problems because they have greater difficulty crossing cultural boundaries due to an oppositional critical frame of reference and oppositional identity; there evolved a folk theory of getting ahead in which schooling competes with and may adversely affected by other survival strategies; and their distrust of white people and skepticism make it harder for them to accept and follow school rules and standard practices that enhance academic success. (p-334)

One major component of school culture are teachers. Relations with teachers are the primary interaction for students in the school environment. If schools are representative of the culture of power, then teachers also reflect the culture of power, unless they actively try not to. If students of color see white teachers as their primary contact in a racist institution, why would they want to learn from them?

Many authors have argued that the primary reason students of color do not succeed in school is that the teaching force is primarily white and what is needed are more teachers of color (Delpit,1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Villegas,Lucas, 2002; Nieto 2003). These scholars argue that teachers of color are better able to reach and

influence students of color by acting as role models and placing learning within a familiar context. But, while the number of students of color is increasing in public schools, the percentage of teachers of color is declining. Villegas and Lucas document that the percentage of white teachers in all public schools rose from 86.8% to 90.7% from 1991 to 1996 and will continue to rise. Regarding students, in 1972, students of color accounted for 22% of all public school students and in 1998, the percentage has risen to 37%. Students of color by 2035 are expected to be the majority of students in the United States (Villegas, Lucas, 2002) The end result is that more white teachers will be teaching more students of color in the years to come.

Facing the reality that the teaching force will be predominantly white and the students will be by majority students of color, scholars have proposed solutions for improving the relationship between white teachers and students of color. Gloria Ladson-Billings, in her book *The Dreamkeepers*, profiles exceptional teachers of students of color and includes some white teachers as examples. She emphasizes that these white teachers interact within the communities of color outside of school. Also, these teachers work to highlight student strengths and potential and avoid a negative pattern of reprimanding wrong behavior. In, *Crossing Over to Canaan*, Ladson-Billings describes a project to train new teachers in becoming “culturally competent” and becoming successful teachers of students of color. She describes four areas of culturally competent teaching: 1. teachers understand culture and its role in education, 2. teachers take responsibility for learning about students’ culture and community, 3. teachers use student culture as a basis for learning; and, 4. teachers promote a flexible use of students’ local and global culture.

White Teacher Identity Development

Gary Howard, in his book, We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multi-Racial Schools (1999), presents an approach for anti-racist identity development for white educators that will improve their teaching of students of color. The premise of his book is connected to the book title which is a quote from Malcolm X. Howard states that white educators cannot be effective teachers of students of color until they have deeply investigated (and come to “know”) their own racial identity. This involves recognizing all of harm that has come to people of color as a result of White dominance and the continuing influence of White dominance in the present. In his book and training, Howard points to social dominance theory which explains how human history is filled with examples of one group exerting dominance over another. The past 500 years have been period of White European dominance and all other groups have become inferior “negative reference groups.” In a social dominance paradigm, minority groups are defined by their differences to the dominant group. This explains why whites often have difficulty defining their ethnicity. For whites, coming to grips with ethnicity also involves acknowledging the victims of white dominance. This is a painful process and many in Howard’s workshops resist it. If white teachers wish to be effective teachers of students of color, they must go through it. Howard states:

Because European dominance has been so broadly and effectively established, it is important to ask ourselves as White educators how our own social positionality and history of dominance might be implicated in the disproportionate distribution of privilege and penalty in contemporary educational systems. We ought to seek this understanding not because we stand accused of the sins and excesses of our ancestors, but because we are committed to equitable opportunities and outcomes for all of our students. In seeking this understanding, however, it must be acknowledged that is difficult for the members of any hegemonic group to see their own dominance. Because of our social positionality as Whites in western settings, the arrangements of dominance may appear “normal” to us, part of the assumed and natural fabric of reality (pg 34).

Howard presents a “White Identity Orientations” model (see Appendix C) that shows white identity across a spectrum. At one end is the endorsement of white social dominance and at the other is the acknowledgement of a racist past and present and a commitment to creating a future of equality. Howard’s model is divided into three modalities of growth: thinking, feeling and acting; and spreads across three identities: fundamentalist, integrationist and transformationist. In the integrationist orientation, Howard states, “Integrationists acknowledge the historical reality of White dominance, but they usually fail to grasp the significance of its continuing effects in contemporary social institutions.” (pg103) Looking at my own identity development, I recognize this orientation lists many characteristics that define me or have defined me. For example, feeling guilt, I was in the mode where I had not fully examined all the systematic aspects of racism and had not moved from guilt to action. In addition, I recognize I entered teaching with a touch of “missionary zeal” about helping others. Ladson-Billings (2001) comments that approaching teaching with the idea of “helping the less fortunate” can affirm the idea that others are needy and disadvantaged. She states, “such an approach to teaching diverse groups of students renders their culture irrelevant.” This is also a trait of the integrationist phase. Of the third transformationist phase, Howard writes,

Whites who enter the transformationist orientation have experienced a profound shift in their understanding and themselves. They have acknowledged, critiqued and rejected the legitimacy of the dominance paradigm. They have committed themselves to a lifelong process of dismantling the assumption of rightness, the luxury of ignorance, and the legacy of privilege that have been the foundations of White hegemony for centuries. Although there is no ultimate escape from these negative realities of Whiteness, they are not overwhelmed by guilt or shame. Having changed themselves, they are passionate about educating other whites and committed to working with colleagues from all racial groups to overcome the social arrangements of past and present dominance. (pp 107-08)

In the end, Howard argues that it is possible for white educators to develop a positive white identity.

The goal for White people in the process of racial identity development is not to un-become White but rather to transform ourselves, and hopefully for others, the meaning of Whiteness. Just as African-Americans have challenged the negative associations of “Blackness” and chosen to recast their identity in their own positive image, so Whites need to acknowledge and work through the negative historical implications of “Whiteness” and create for ourselves a transformed identity as White people committed to equity and social change. To teach my white students that there are different ways of being White, and that they have a choice as White people to become champions of justice and social healing, is to provide them a positive direction for growth and to grant them the dignity of their own being.(pp-112)

Another author-scholar who sheds light on the dynamic of white teachers teaching students of color is Julie Kailin. In her article, “Preparing Urban Teachers for Schools and Communities: An Anti-Racist Perspective” (1999), Kailin outlines her recommendations for anti-racist training of white teachers. Like Howard, she emphasizes the importance for teachers of moving from a personal to a societal/institutional view of racism. She comments that anti-racist training programs will be limited if “they focus only on the psychology of the individual rather than on the structural contexts which breed racism in the individual.” Kailin argues that within the context of education, an anti-racist perspective defines white racism as the main reason for the failure of students of color. Other writers, Troyna & Williams (1986) write, “the alienation of black students, for example, is not pathological but a rational response to racism in the educational system.” White teachers then need to question how they have been socialized, racialized by living in this system. Kailin writes,

When we are speaking of a teaching force that just happens to be ninety percent white, we must also confront the other aspect of this reality-which is that these people became white in a context of white supremacy. In considering the situation of white teachers teaching students of color, an examination of this social context is critical. (1998, pp81)

Kailin also addresses the problem of the lack of teachers of color and how white teachers may not be able to be a substitute for that type of role model. She states,

children in education may be robbed of their role models as they are taught by people who are usually divorced or ignorant of their communities and lived experiences and who may entertain negative stereotypes about them.(1998, pp 82)

Reflecting on my own teaching, if I am teaching out of a paternalistic or missionary impulse, I may be reinforcing relations of domination.

In, “How White Teachers Perceive the Problem of Racism in Their Schools: A Case Study in “Liberal” Lakeview” (1999), Kailin undertakes a study to understand how

white teachers at an urban school with more than 50 % African-American students explain racism in education. She discovers that white teachers (98% of teaching staff) at the school by majority believe that black students and black culture are at fault for educational failure. Furthermore, she finds the teachers on the whole do not acknowledge institutional racism (“the ways in which historical patterns of racism still adhere to structures and behaviors even as laws and are changed to eradicate them”) account for African-American students’ lack of success. She finds that teachers blame students and their home life for failures in education (i.e. “these people do not value education”). She also finds that teachers express a feeling of being intimidated by black students. Teachers at Lakeview also express a sentiment that black students are favored and not held accountable for their actions. When students accused teachers of being racist, teachers felt they were victims of black racism. Teachers also singled out black parents as being racist. Teachers expressed that black staff at school were uncooperative and unsupportive of white teachers. Kailin explains that these attitudes could not be attributed to all of the white teachers at school, but her results show how a majority of the teachers assess the problem of racism in education. Kailin concludes that white teachers will not admit to being overtly racist, (socially unacceptable in today’s terms), but they may act unknowingly in ways that preserve the status quo (Kailin, 1999)

Both Howard and Kailin’s work have been inspirational and informative in my work to understand the racial dynamics between me as a white teacher and my students of color. Recalling my reflection of reading Ladson-Billings’ The Dreamkeepers, I did for the first time question my ability to be an effective teacher for students of color. Thinking of Kailin’s analysis, Ladson-Billings was pointing out that as a white male entering the teaching profession, without investigating and inquiring into my own ethnicity (the absence of which is due to white privilege), I could in fact be damaging to my students.

African-American Adolescent Development

While it has been important to me to research and investigate my own White identity, I found it equally important to research the development of identity formation amongst African-Americans, particularly in the adolescent age, as this is the age of my students. Beverly Daniel Tatum, in her book, Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? (1999) offers a theory of African-American racial identity development from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Using the question from the book title, Tatum explains that after a childhood period when it is easy to integrate with other races, African-Americans in adolescence begin to more intensively investigate their racial identity and they seek their peers for answers. Puberty certainly encourages questions such as “Who am I? Who can I be?”, but research has shown that black adolescents begin this inquiry earlier than do whites.

Tatum explains that black youths think develop racial awareness at an early age because of the messages they received from society. When Tatum’s ten year old son was asked to describe himself, he did not mention the fact he was black. Most people commented on how tall he was and that is what he mentioned first when describing himself. Tatum wonders how her son would respond at age sixteen when he is taller, when he’s wearing the fashion of his age group, when he’s been followed around the

mall, and when people have crossed the street to avoid him. Black youth in adolescence may be for the first time experiencing messages from society that race matters. In adolescence for black youths, race becomes a salient feature for society and black adolescents thus begin to identify themselves more with race.

In the exploration of racial identity, black adolescents look not to their parents (they don't want to be like them), but instead will look to their peers. Popular culture and all the images of what it means to be black will have the greatest influence. For a black youth, the kids at the cafeteria table have absorbed the stereotypical images of black youth in the popular culture and are reflecting those images in their self-representation. Certain styles of speech, dress, and music may be embraced as “authentically black” and become highly valued, while attitudes and behaviors associated with Whites are viewed with disdain. There is a certain “in your face” quality that these adolescents can take on, which their teachers often experience as threatening. Tatum writes,

We need to understand that in racially mixed settings, racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism. Joining one's peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy. What is problematic is that the young people are operating with a very limited definition of what it means to be black, based largely on cultural stereotypes (pg62).

In relationship to education and school, the development of a racial identity can give black adolescents an oppositional attitude towards school. As they define authentic blackness to be everything opposite to whiteness, success in school may be seen as acting white. How has success in school been seen as white? This was not always the case, as black families in the segregated south were opposed to white racism but believed in the power of education. Tatum argues that we must present to black adolescents alternative images of African American academic achievement; therefore, success in school won't be seen as white. We must offer images to youth that differ from society stereotypes. Youth should be encouraged to talk to their friends and explore their identity collectively. The black lunch table symbolizes where they can be supported and not contradicted.

Student-Teacher Relationship

Having discussed both anti-racist pedagogy for white teachers and psychology and identity development for black adolescents, I wonder where the two will meet? Authors I have mentioned above such as Gloria Ladson-Billings have offered an approach for white teachers that emphasizes culturally competent teaching. Ladson-Billings (2001) argues there are some successful white teachers of students of color,

in the sense they are able to help children realize academic excellence while allowing them to identify positively with their own heritage and background. Such teachers had the ability to incorporate and legitimate the student's home culture into the curriculum and were successful in engaging both teachers and students and their families into the collective struggle against the status quo when necessary(p.83).

Thinking of the process of my own investigation into my own ethnic and racial identity and also considering perspectives of adolescent development for African-American students, I seek to understand how my African-American students respond to me as a white teacher how they might perceive my behavior as racist. In defining racist or biased behavior, Benokraitis and Feagin (1986) classify racism in scheme of

discrimination, as “overt” (most blatant), “covert” (clandestine, maliciously motivated) and “subtle” (unequal treatment that is visible but so internalized as to be considered routine in bureaucratized settings). I have found these categories useful as a way of categorizing students’ perceptions of racist behavior.

Many scholars have documented both the successful and unsuccessful experience of teachers teaching students of color. Mostly the unsuccessful teachers are white teachers who are not connecting with the personal lives of students of color. I believe my study documents my process as I attempt to understand why African-American students would label me or other white teachers at our school racist.

Methodology

In order to answer the question about how my African-American students respond to me as a white male teacher, I decided to organize a series of interviews with the African-American students in my class. In order that the students could feel free to answer the questions honestly, I asked a female African-American teaching colleague to administer the interview. I would not be present but I would audiotape the interview. I planned to ask students a series of questions about their experiences of racism in a variety of settings; in society, in schools, and in their relationships with their teachers. Finally, the students would be asked questions specifically about my classroom and their relationship to me. I planned the interview so that students could discuss experiences of racism in general before getting into the specifics of teachers. Interestingly, I initially planned record the whole of the interview on tape except for the discussion of my classroom. When the students learned of this, some responded that they preferred that the audiotape be left on because they wanted to be sure I heard what they had to say. In interviews after this, the students were informed they could ask for their response not to be recorded, but no one requested this.

I performed two interviews both with same questions but treated each interview as a separate case because each interview had dynamics amongst the group that I felt were important to highlight. I present the interviews beginning with the question asked and provide what I thought were the most telling responses from the students. I also add commentary to both the ideas and the context of student responses.

In addition to the interviews, I had the African-American students of my class record several written documents related to the interviews and their opinions of their teachers. First, I had students who participated in the interview fill out a post-interview reflection where they answered a series of questions about their experience in the interview. Also, in one interview, the audiotape did not function and the group interview was not recorded. In this case, the day after the interview I had students record their recollection of the most significant points of the interview. The group later reassembled for a repeat interview, but I have presented relevant points from their written recollections of the first interview. Also, I passed out to students a mid-year evaluation of my class and I gathered responses that were helpful to me in this research. Finally, I asked the students to write an entry in their journal describing both their favorite teacher and the qualities of their ideal teacher.

Also, in addition to the feedback I received from the students, I have also drawn upon my own personal recorded reflections during this research process. I feel I have been changed greatly from the process of doing this research. From the beginning of the year, I knew this was an important issue for me to research. For a while as I struggled through the process, I wondered why I had chosen such a difficult topic, one that made me feel so uncomfortable. Many times I considered changing my topic to something “safer”, more traditional in pedagogy; however, I did stick with this idea, feeling determined to improve my relationships with all my students of color, particularly the African-American students. If not for this project, I question whether I ever would have investigated in depth the issue of how African-American students at our school view their white teachers.

Reflection - Data Collection Process

I delayed a long while in bringing up the idea of my study to the students. On a brief vacation I remember thinking to myself, “I’ve got to open up to them about this. Just break the ice”. I found the topic of their attitude towards me as a white teacher difficult to bring it up because the atmosphere in the class was often very tense. Many African-American students in the class regularly earned punishments. When the environment was so oppositional, I questioned how could I then ask the African-American students for their help in this research? (In retrospect, it seems perfectly rational.)

I recall the day I first announced to the class that I was conducting a research project regarding African-American students’ perceptions of racism in the schools and by their teachers. I was nervous about their response. I listened to myself as I spoke to the class. There was silence in the classroom. As I mentioned, my relationship with certain African-American students at times felt so bad that I wondered if they would want to help me in this research. I could not offer them extra points for their grade as I couldn’t offer the chance to the whole class. The most I could offer them was food and drink after school.

However, several students did stay after class to collect permission slips from me to participate in the research. I remember the look in their eyes. The atmosphere of tension and conflict was suddenly replaced with something different. They wanted to participate regardless of what they might get out of it.

Data Analysis and Review

Group Interview #1 Context:

Initially, I planned that my study would involve only fifteen African-American students of the thirty students in one of my three classes. I wanted the students to all be from the class where I was having the greatest amount of conflicts. Because of a deadline, I gave consent forms for parent signature on a Tuesday and hoped to have them back in two days. Students did not bring the consent forms back and I had to reschedule the interview twice. Finally I had enough consent forms in and the interview was scheduled. I had agreements from ten of fifteen students that they would participate in the study. I also offered drinks and sweets as an additional incentive for participation. After school, I went with recording equipment to my colleague's room and discovered only four of my students had shown up. I was disappointed by this and wondered if I had overestimated the other students' enthusiasm. To make matters worse, two of the students attending I had sent out earlier in the day with discipline referrals. They had not returned to class. I suspected they had not brought their referrals to the office; but, I decided not to ask them about this and allowed them to participate. Also, there was an additional student there who was not in my class. The students asked that she be allowed to stay and said she would just listen and not be a part of the interview. I thought this would detract from the formality of my research, but I allowed her to stay. As I later listened to the tape, it turned out that Ebonee did in fact participate, but I was glad for this as she was incredibly expressive and articulate. Even though she didn't offer specific feedback about my class, her thoughts on racism and racism in the classroom were very insightful. Below is a presentation of the relevant points from the interview.

Group Interview #1: Interview with Kristen (K), Elizabeth(E), Ashley(A), Ebonee(Eb) and David(D), conducted by my teaching colleague Ms. Smith (S)

Question: What is your definition or conception of racism?

The students responded with the following exchange:

Elizabeth: Racism is when there's two different colors

Kristen: Two different races

Elizabeth: Yeah-two different races that, um, don't like each other

Kristen: That don't get along with each other

Elizabeth: Yeah, that don't like each other because of the color of their skin

The students here present a definition of racism that involves people of two skin colors not getting along and not liking each other. Also, the students imply that all races can participate in racism. The students also begin a pattern of finishing each other's thoughts without causing irritation to the one being interrupted. This to me connects to Tatum's perspective that black adolescents look to each other for support in their perspectives.

Question: Why is there racism? How to stop racism?

In two separate instances, Kristen offered these responses:

Kristen: They really couldn't do nothing about it, cause that's just some kids parents teaching them a lot of hate, different racism and stuff like that. That's what I think.

Kristen: Only thing that can stop racism is their parents telling them to stop.

In these remarks, I am unsure if Kristen is talking about her own family or about parents of White and other races. My feeling is she is talking about her own family.

Question: What are examples of racism in society?

Kristen: When we go to the store and when people be following us around, like a different race will say “hurry up and buy” (said with Asian accent)

Ebonee: Some stores don’t want you shopping in that store because of the color of your skin, they just assumed you broke

Ashley: Yeah, when I went to Macon, Georgia. It was these white people on the side of the road, and we was walking past, and me and my cousins, they (the white people) was throwing up the middle finger and waving these little flags. They was like Hitler kind of flags.

Kristen: On Feb 20 on Saturday, we were trying to get on the bus, and this lady was like, “well if you ain’t got no money, then you can get off.” She didn’t see the money we had. Then she drove off

Kristen: If we be walking down the street there be Chinese people of a different race or something, they like push their kids to the other side of the street.

I am surprised to hear the students talk about experiencing racism in stores because this is to me a stereotypical example and I somehow believed the girls would share other examples. Two of these examples correspond to Tatum’s writings. She states that black adolescents receive messages from society about their identity through experiences of being watched in a store and people move to other side of the street when they walk by. Part of me wonders whether these experiences really happened or is Kristen making the stories up based on what she has heard from others.

Question: Do you think there is racism at school?

Kristen: In my science class there is racism. There were these two girls, I don’t know what they was, I think they was Chinese and we were like in a group and they was like, “we’re doing this and you’re doing this.” I was like, “shhh-whatever.” I just left the group. They was just trying to force something.

Elizabeth: In the PE area there were some kids from Chinese school that dropped their backpack and then when black people come by, they like, pick up their backpack, cause I guess they think we gonna steal from ‘em. Or, if they have a conversation in the girls bathroom, they’ll start speaking Spanish, so we won’t understand and interrupt their conversation.

Ashley: Oh, I have a great example. I was in the bathroom right, and this Muslim girl, she wrote on the wall, “we Muslims think people like you are brain-(expletive)-dead.”

Ebonee: When I first got here, I had to sit with a group of Mexican people and they was just sitting there talking in their language and they just looking at me and talking and stuff and I just smashed on ‘em real quick. (K interjects “cause you thought they were..?) No, I know because my momma and brother be doing that at home.

Students were discussing behavior of black administrator towards a black student. They wondered how there could be racist behavior amongst the same race. Ashley responds:

Ashley: You could hate your own race.

These responses highlight the students’ attention to other ethnic and racial groups at school and their treatment by them. Kristen feels pressured by Chinese students in a class group. Ashley reacts strongly to a Muslim girl’s comment that blacks are not intelligent. Elizabeth objects to the Chinese students guarding their backpacks when

black students walk by. Elizabeth and Ebonee resent Latinos speaking in “their language” in front of them, when the intent seems to exclude them from the conversation. In a group discussion of this data in a research class, two white colleagues questioned why Ebonee’s should be averse to hearing other people speak “their language”. An African-American colleague supported Ebonee and felt that he had similar experiences of feeling excluded from a conversation when perhaps you were being talked about. I couldn’t recall ever feeling angry at feeling I was being talked about in a foreign language. I wondered if being a part of the culture of power made me feel more secure? This exchange in my discussion group also reminded me of Tatum’s point that black adolescents will seek each other out (i.e.-sit at the same table) because they are less likely to discount their peers’ experience. Ashley’s statement about the possibility of hating your own race shows she is in a thought process about how to define being black and how that relates to racism.

Question: Do you think there is racism in the classroom?

Kristen: there’s different ways of racism, because if you got a black teacher, then if you were different races, and you was not really a good student, and you aren’t getting right grades and a black person was a good student and getting good grades they think, like, she’s just giving her a good grade because she black or she’s just doing that to make a show off and stuff like that

Elizabeth: Our math teacher, I don’t know if this racist, but when you do your work, you get bad grades and when you don’t do your work. I think she’s like the Chinese people, cause like, we’ll raise our hand and instead of calling on us sometimes, its always the Chinese people she calls on

Ebonee: yeah, cause, one day this girl named Alanda, she’s Mexican, she walked in late with no pass, and usually he’ll put names up on the board, but he didn’t put her name up on the board. But my friend Lisa came in late and he gonna put her name up on the board and give her a check by her name and make her do detention and a parent phone call home.

The data here shows that students are keenly aware of their treatment by teachers. I interpret Kristen’s statement to relate to her realization that a black teacher could favor black students in the same way that white teachers might favor white students. Elizabeth and Ebonee’s statements describe how black students receive unequal treatment as compared to Chinese and Latino students.

Question: What is your attitude towards White Teachers?

The group initially responded as follows:

Group: hmmmmmm

Ashley: I have a good attitude towards all teachers.

Ebonee: I do too.

Elizabeth: I don’t have no attitude against them, but like I got a feeling like I’m judged.

Ebonee: yeah, like Ms. _____

Elizabeth: like “all them black kids” or “she’s gonna be bad.”

In this exchange it seems that Ashley and Ebonee want to appear fair towards their white teachers. Elizabeth also follows this approach but describes that she feels mistreated “judged” by her white teachers. She recalls some teacher who stereotypes all black students. I notice how the group all takes cues from each other in determining what to say.

Ebonee: oh I have another example-like when your teacher gonna have somebody special come up in her class, she go to you directly and say, "oh-don't do this and don't do that". She don't go to none of them little white kids or um "Caucasians" and I be mad and my teacher did that to me and that's why I'm out of her class. (later)She be making me feel hecka embarrassed like I be the only one doing something bad.

Ebonee's story made me think of the exact way I handled a situation when I was going to be out of class and a substitute was going to be in. I left a note with the sub and wrote down which students were (I thought) going to be a problem. The next day I returned and received an angry response from those kids whose names I had written down. They wondered why I thought they were bad kids. I also related Ebonee's comment to an off-site school counselor who was a young Pilipino man who has worked intensively with an African-American population. He commented that African-American students can claim racism, but not see how their behavior contributes to the way they are treated. In this view, Ebonee does not see that she was singled out for her behavior, not because of her race. But do we discount her perspective all together?

Ashley: Gosh-its like different out here from where I used to stay because it's a lot of racism there but it depend on what city you go to, because in Decatur, Georgia, its not racism, but in Macon, man there's so much racism, you hmm, you probably find somebody hangin' from a tree. (Group response "oohhh") Out here, it's a lot of mixed teachers like, black and white teachers, out there its like all black teachers.

Ashley's point relates to Tatum's observation that some schools in the deep-south have predominantly an African-American teaching staff and have been more successful teaching African-American students.

Ebonee: (referring to unfair treatment) If it was us, it would have been detention, Friday School, DHP(Discipline Hearing Panel).

At the drop of a hat, Ebonee offers a plethora of examples of negative consequences that can befall a black student in school. From the tone of her comment, I feel she could have extended the list to include "juvenile hall, prison." Her comment confirms Tatum's view that black youth's are keenly aware of negative images shown of blacks. She is also suspicious of the school justice system and believes Blacks are treated unfairly.

Ashley: This white teacher, she was very racist. She didn't think I knew how to do my Spanish words. I knew what I was doing and she was making it seem like I was dumb.

Ashley's comment connects to the many theorists (Ladson-Billings, Nieto, Delpit) who argue that teachers do not hold high expectations for black students. Ashley shows how aware she is of this fact.

Elizabeth: I remember when I was getting my classes changed, and it was a teacher at this school, when I walked into her class she said, "another black child-oh my gosh" she was all looking at me-"oh you must be" and I was like, "I don't want to be in this classroom. I can't be in this classroom".

Elizabeth again relates a story of a teacher who has obvious stereotypes of black students. At twelve years old, Elizabeth already seems fed up with this aspect of school. Later in the interview, she expresses similar feelings about not wanting to be in my class.

Question: Can you describe a white teacher who treated you fairly?

Kristen: it was my 2nd grade teacher, my favorite teacher, she was cool to all, to everybody, she didn't have no special attitude towards anybody

Ashley: my 4th and 5th grade teacher, he was real nice, he treated everybody the same. And if somebody got in trouble, and they didn't want to tell him who did it, then they would both get in trouble. And my 5th grade teacher, she was so-so-so-so-so nice. And she was just, she wasn't racist. My 3rd grade teacher was racist, I swear to god.

Ebonee: my 2nd grade, she treated everyone with respect, she treated everybody equal too because if two people got into an argument, she wouldn't just send one down, she would send both y'all down. And both y'all have to get in trouble for it. And it wouldn't just end up on one person, she would send both down, cause they was both wrong.

All three of these examples have a common theme which is fairness by a white teacher means they “don't have no special attitude towards anybody”. Ashley and Ebonee both describe teachers they had who wouldn't pick sides in an argument, they would send both students out of the class.

Question: How would you describe Mr. Melvin's class?

Note: these answers to these questions were not recorded on audiotape. Ms. Smith wrote the students' comments down but did not indicate who had spoken.

He's nice sometimes

I don't like his class

He spends more time on his religion Christianity

He doesn't like Mexicans

He said his name is the best name

He doesn't like names that begin with E

He hates me and other student

He singles out

He treats badly people who are late

He gives referrals unfairly when others are doing same thing

He focuses on African-American students

He gets angry and takes it out on other people

I was glad to hear the point of positive feedback about my class. There are a few points that seem to be reasonable critiques of my behavior. First, I do react negatively when students arrive to class late and are disruptive when they come into class. This will cause me to immediately write a student's name on the board. I feel my behavior here is justified. I may be inconsistent in the way I discipline student's behavior and I may focus (or appear to focus) more on African-American students in terms of enforcing the rules. Also, I will hear students comment about their impression of my anger in the second interview, so I need to consider that my being angry may cause me to act unfairly.

On the other hand, I feel there are points of feedback that seem unreasonable to me. The point about not-liking students' names that begin with “E” may have perhaps been said as a joke. Also, one time as a joke, I did say that I thought my last name was the best name. Also, I find it hard to see how I spend more time on my religion, Christianity. This is interesting because in our class of World History, many African-American students ask why we spend so much time learning about other people.

Students Written Reflections on Interview

The students wrote about how they enjoyed being able to express their feelings and talk about their teachers. Kristen in particular indicates she wanted to talk about her experience in my classroom. She observes my goal is to improve my teaching.

Elizabeth: It was fun. I like to tell about things like mine. The best part was when we were talking about the teachers. Mr. Melvin is doing this to be a better teacher.

Kristen: It was nice and I felt good about it and I was able to express all my feelings. The best part was talking about the things in Mr. Melvin's class. Mr. Melvin is doing this to change racism in other classes and mostly his. The interviewer Ms. Smith did a good job with the interviewing.

David: The best part was when they talked about the racism they experienced. The goal of Mr. Melvin's research is to understand racism.

Case # 2 -Group Interview #2-Context

The second interview took place several weeks after the first. I had originally scheduled the interview again after school. In addition, because I was concerned with the limited number of students participating, I opened up the research to include students from another class. Again, out of 30 students, there were 14 African-American students in this class. Many of the students seemed interested and were glad that I had extended the research to include their class. On the day of the interview, I reminded the students from both classes of the interview time and felt sure there would be a good turn out. At the scheduled time of the interview, however, only one student showed up. Another student was in my class after school, but she was too shy to participate with only one other student. I felt very dejected then wondering if this research was even possible. I was sure the students were interested (at least they sounded interested), but I gathered that it was hard to get students to stay after school. I then decided to try a different approach of using the last period of the school day as an interview time. Many students from one class had gym that period and I could send students from my last period class to the interviewer's room. Also, my teaching colleague who was leading the interview, Rose Smith, was free that period.

The day of the scheduled interview arrived and during lunch I brought over the audio equipment. I set the system up but noticed a high pitched squeak in the microphone. It did go away after a few moments. When the last period arrived, I sent eight students over for the interview. Ms. Smith phoned to say seven students had arrived from gym class. I was encouraged; fifteen students! At end of the day Ms. Smith returned the audiotape to me and said the interview had gone very well and she hoped the recording was fine.

In fact, the recording had not worked at all due to a technical problem. I asked the students the next day to record what they remembered from the interview. I scheduled the interview again. Almost all of the same students attended again, but I worry their responses lost some of the freshness of the first interview. There are signs to me in the interview that are characteristic of discussion a 2nd time. The interviewer, Ms. Smith, also commented the group was not as energetic as during the first interview. Below are some significant parts from the second interview.

Case #2 –Group Interview Participants: Ms. Smith (H) and Brittany (B), Tiffany (T), Robert (R), Tanya (T), Sarae (S), Cheryl (C), Shanice (Sh), DeJune (D) , Amber (A), Quentin (Q)

Question: What is your definition or conception of racism?

The interview starts out with the following exchange

Brittany: Person judging another person by the color of their skin

Amber: What you wear. I was in the jewelry store with my Dad and there were lots of Caucasians. They were dressed up and my Dad went up to the counter and the lady she was like getting an attitude with my dad because my Dad wasn't wearing the proper clothes because we were black and stuff and she is going to be nice to the Caucasian person that was in front of us.

Cheryl: How do you know she wasn't just having a bad day? (interrupting)

Group: woahhh!

Smith: That's OK for you to comment on-that's what we're here for.

Brittany: Yeah-how you know she wasn't just having a baad day? (in a joking tone)

Amber: Because, she wasn't like that with others.

Brittany: Do you think it had something to do with the color of your skin or the way you all approached her, anyway-why do you think she had that feeling towards you?

Cheryl: You're announcing (Brittany has been over-announcing her words since the beginning and seems to be speaking in a mock talk show style. This bothers me as it is injecting a comical tone to the interview)

Amber: Because, we came up like the other Caucasians, white people that talked to her and we did the same thing they did.

Group: (Laughter)

Sarae: That ain't racist-talking bout what you wear.

Brittany: giiirl!

Quentin: that's judging.

Smith: We're not trying to judge each others statements. You can make a statement and comment from your own experience. You can comment on it like she asked a clarifying question, that's fine. But we're not trying to find out whether it makes sense or not. That will be Mr. Melvin's job. Ok, anyone else want to explain racism or experience you had and give an example of racism in society?

This is an interesting start to the interview. The second comment someone makes about their experience is questioned by another student (the opposite of what should happen at the cafeteria table, according to Tatum). First Cheryl and then Sarae question Amber's experience of racism based on what you wear. It is interesting that later in the interview Amber will be talked about being accused of "acting white" based on her dress, language and performance in school. Maybe this is why Cheryl and Sarae don't support her. Also, Brittany seems to be assuming a facilitator's role speaking in an overly-formal tone and pretending to be on a talk-show. I feel this may interfere with the intimate atmosphere and will discourage people to open up.

Question: What are your personal experiences with racism?

Brittany: an experience I had was with me and my brother, we were in a supermarket grocery store and we were laughing so the Caucasian (laughter at her pronunciation) guy next to us said "that's why black kids don't know anything, because we don't take everything seriously". But, I

think it was wrong because he shouldn't judge us because I can see kids in school doing all the laughing and stuff, but he judged us just because we were laughing and just because the color of our skin, because what he hear from other people.

Robert: Oh yeah when I was at 7-11, I went to get me a slushie from the back and then the two people working at the cash register, they was staring at me like I was gonna steal something. There was this Caucasian (laughter) boy behind me and he was like in the front near the candy section and he was stealing hecka stuff but they wasn't paying attention to him. They was paying attention to me. Then, when we got outside the store, he was pulling hecka candy out of his pockets and stuff. And-I don't think that was right.

Brittany: Just to follow up on what he said, they was too busy watching him when they was getting bummed from someone else (laughter).

In her story, Brianna takes offense at someone's judgment of black kids. The man in the supermarket assumed her behavior there would indicate how she acts in school. Robert reacts to being watched in a store when in fact a white kid was doing the stealing.

Question – Do you think there is racism at school?

Dejeune: My sister wanted to play double-dutch with these girls and they wouldn't let her play because she was black and she just started flashing (yelling) on 'em.

Brittany: I do think there is racial stuff here but that is because of what kids learn at home, even though that stuff is stopped its still going on in schools on the streets any just, anywhere you generally go.

Smith: Anyone else?

Amber: yeah-when your color is black and they call you white (laughter), because they judge you by how you're talking and everything, like if you talk proper you're white and if you dress a certain way you're white. If you don't wear baggy pants you're white.

Sarae: if you don't wear what?

Cheryl: Baggy pants.

Sarae: Not all black people wear baggy pants.

Cheryl: But boys-you mean boys.

Dejeune tells of how her sister stood up for herself. Brittany echoes comments of earlier students who commented racism in rooted in home life. Here Amber comments that racism is being called white when you are really black. She feels she must talk and dress in a certain way to be called black. Sarae again reacts to Amber's comments (these are the only times Sarae has spoken) and disagrees with her.

The conversation progressed to the idea of dress and what it means to be black.

Cheryl: What I think she was trying to say is that black people stereotype black people. Black boys-they like to wear their pants like big and stuff and we used to like, you know white kids when they have they clothes.

Brittany: Pressed! (laughter)

Cheryl: They clothes is nice- tight and stuff. They wear their clothes kind of tight. Black girls, they wear their clothes tight.

Brittany: White girls do too.

Cheryl: Hispanics, especially.

Brittany: They judged on the way they dress. I can name a trillion white guys that walk around with their pants to their knees- a trillion of them.

The girls here describe how styles of dress can be attributed to racial identity, but it is not always clear if a style of dress defines one race exclusively.

Question - Have you experienced racism in your relationship with your teachers?

Brittany: Oh yeah- I have an experience with that with one teacher. She sits all of the African-American kids in the back. I asked her what was the reason for that and she made up an excuse that they (the students in the front) can't see because they need glasses. Well, we had to strain our eyes in the back of the classroom.

Cheryl: Like in the back of the bus.

Brittany: Basically all you see was a bunch of good Asian kids working at the front and all you see..., if you mix a whole bunch of disruptive kids together, that's what will cause a very big commotion in the class.

In describing a teacher who sits all of the black students in the back, Brittany explains why students would act disruptive. Note: she substitutes “disruptive” for “black” in her second comment. Cheryl draws a parallel to blacks’ treatment in the classroom to a period of segregation on buses.

Cheryl: Some teachers do different things on punishment-like they treat their white kids different-that white kids don't get in trouble as much because their stereotypes that they good and that black kids is bad.

Cheryl draws attention to a teacher’s preferential treatment of white students over black students because of a stereotype. She does not mention the race of the teacher she is talking about-but implies the stereotype about white and black students is universal.

Brittany: We talked about this last time- sometimes it don't have to do with race- its just the way they are- it depends on the teacher-they don't have nothing against race- its just how they treat you. Like I have a teacher currently who is very sarcastic and she likes to nip the bud with the African-American students. But sometimes she dos the dozens to everyone so I don't really think it's a racist thing I just think she's generally sarcastic.

Brittany defends a teacher here who other students have called racist. She claims to recognize that her treatment of students is the same across the board.

Robert: like in my 2nd period class, my PE, we had to run 8 laps, me and my friend Renars, and then my teacher made me run another one 'cause this one Asian boy he wasn't finished. I guess he thinks he's fast and he made us run until that boy was stopped. Then we asked the teacher why did you just let him stop and he said, "because I trust him." We asked why don't you trust us? He said, "I only trust Asians."

I question whether this story is true because it would seem inexcusable for a teacher to say something like that to a student. I wonder if the teacher was joking (which still would be an inappropriate joke).

Dejeune: I was up in my 5th period class. There was another student talking, and he was white and he was talking proper and stuff and I said the same answer and he said, "you don't have to write vocabulary."

Robert: Shady

Cheryl: My teacher told me I'm not going to use that word because I know you're not smart and I know you're not going to know what I'm talking about. And then she said- even though you're not going to write it down, I know you're not smart enough to open a book and figure it out.

Here Dejeune expresses anger how a white student who speaks “proper” is able to earn a reward even though he and Dejeuner gave the same answer. Dejeuner believes she is treated differently by her teachers based on the way she talks. Cheryl relates a story of a teacher who demeaned her intelligence. Its hard to believe a teacher would say such a thing, but Cheryl recalls it vividly. This corresponds to many scholars’ view that what hurts many African-American students’ are low expectations by teachers. Again, I notice that I am skeptical of the validity of the students’ experience. Does the validity matter or should we honor the emotion behind the story.

Question: What is your attitude towards white teachers?

Cheryl: Like a stereotype? It seems like you can trust a black teacher more than you can trust a white teacher.

Smith: Why?

Cheryl: they pretty much gonna have your back. Like I don’t think a black teacher gonna help an Asian students back

Brittany: I don’t have any attitude towards white teacher- because you can have a white teacher and he will treat you the same as all of the other students. And you can meet a black teacher and he acting all white and he’ll turn you. You seen black on black crime.

Smith: When you see a white teacher at the beginning of the year, what do you think?

Cheryl: I have to go through this again. I’m going to have some problems.

Cheryl expresses a series of opinions that she prefers to have black teachers over white teachers. She feels she can trust a black teacher and a white teacher will give her problems. Brittany points out that a white teacher could potentially be better than a black teacher.

Amber: my father, I had a schedule and he’s mad because I had white male teachers and he said that most of them are racist and when I got a bad grade in PE he thought it was because I had a white male teacher and I started thinking that too.

Group-Wow!

Brittany: That’s back to my place of when that’s what you learn at home because she started thinking it because that’s what her daddy told her.

Cheryl: that’s kind of like just the other way around- white people teach their kids not to like black people, so black people teach their kids not to like white people. And then it starts.

Amber again mentions her dad and his views about white teachers. The students also react when she mentions she started picking up her father’s views. Brittany reiterates her point about racism learned at home. When she mentions racism is learned at home, I feel she is talking about black families because she is responding to Amber’s comment. Cheryl observes how black families are racist and how racism becomes a cycle.

Question: Have you ever had a black teacher and if so, what was your reaction?

Amber: I had a black teacher and I was surprised because I never seen a black male teacher at this school.

Question: If you had a black teacher, would it help you?

Brittany: No, I don't think it would help you because if you're doing bad in that class, you're gonna get that grade, or unless the teacher is somewhat different.

Brittany seems to be the student who feels the most strongly that the race of the teacher doesn't matter. Unlike Amber, she is not accused by her peers of "acting white".

Robert: I had a teacher the same race as me so I thought everything was going to be easy so I just started playing around. But around the middle of the marking period I got my progress report and it was bad so then he said he would help me. That's when I started really paying attention. At the end I got a good grade. I felt it helped me a lot and I learned to take all teachers seriously even if they are my same race.

When he had a black teacher, Robert thought the class would be easy and he could play around. When he realizes he could earn a bad grade, he tries harder and realizes that he should take his black teachers seriously.

Cheryl: I said Mr. Thomas was a good teacher and he let you play games and he made learning interesting instead of making it hard and thinking "how am I going to get this grade?" And you actually learn something.

Mr. Thomas is a young African-American teacher who taught many of my students. I often hear stories from the students about how fun his class was. Cheryl comments that his class was not always about getting a good grade. I wonder if my class is too much like that.

Question: What are your impressions of Mr. Melvin's class?

Note: For this interview, the audiotape was recording the conversation. Originally, I had the interviewer record the students' comments so their responses could be anonymous. The students in the first interview expressed concern that I would not be able to hear their feedback. Therefore, for this interview, I had the recording be left on throughout this section.

Brittany: I like his class- we don't read. We do fun projects. He makes learning interesting. Like we play this game Travel and Trade where you travel around to different places and earn money.

I am glad to hear Brittany say these things; but, I can't help but wonder if again she is putting on a positive spin to her comments. I remember many moments when she was critical of the class, yet here she isn't saying anything. She has complained about the reading we do in the class and it seems she begins to complain about that, but then stops herself. Maybe, like a talk show host, she is being political.

Sarae: His class is good – if he can learn to control the bad kids and stop yelling

Cheryl: If people stop throwing things out of the window.

Sarae and Cheryl comment that they don't like that I cannot control the "bad" students of the class. Also, Sarae feels I yell too much.

Shanice: Its cool but sometimes he just does too much..

Brittany: I can help you with that. Say for instance-the name on the board-he'll give you a referral- he won't give you no warning or anything- his nerves will be so bad- he'll just give you a referral for stupid stuff-tapping on the desk or something. Sometimes..OK-here's an example- there's no rule about getting up out of your chair-if you get up out of your chair and he's in a bad mood- you're on your way down to see Mr. Hood.

This is the first time Shanice has participated. Brittany interjects (she is the primary talker here) to explain for Shanice. Brittany explains I will act irrationally when my “nerves is bad.” I could agree with Brittany that this is the case sometimes, but in the moment I feel the students deserve what consequences they are getting. My intention is that the students will follow the rules more attentively. Also, she mentions I have no rule about getting out of your seat. I feel a rule about raising your hand to get out of the seat is oppressive, but I assume that students will not get up and wander around the room. Matt Reider (2003) comments that he faced a problem with his students walking around the class; however, when he taught a subject they were more interested in, they did not walk around as much.

Question: If you’re being treated unfairly-do you think this is connected to racism?

Brittany: yes sometimes I think I am treated unfairly-but I don’t think it’s connected to racism-because there are other kids who act badly and he treats them the same. He gives them the same consequences.

Smith: Any others?

Brittany: no, no others, next question.

I feel Brittany is being controlling here, speaking for the whole group that there are no more comments about me being racist. Some students are trying to remember what they said during the last interview (that was not recorded).

Shanice: yeah I got one- I sometimes am treated unfairly because he’ll take all the black kids names and write them in black marker.

(Later)Quentin: That’s not true. He just picks up whatever marker is there.

I had learned of this comment in the students’ reflections of the last interview. This strikes me as an irrational reaction. Unless it occurred on a deep subconscious level, there is no way I did that intentionally. I am glad that Quentin objects to Shanice’s comment; however, it is interesting to notice these instances when the students decide they don’t support the content of a peer’s racist allegation and in that instance don’t have their peer’s back.

Robert: Me and my Asian friend were talking and he kept us after class and he pulled the Asian kid out of the class and told him not to hang around me because I was nothing but trouble. He let the Asian boy leave and then he made me stay and told me I was doing bad because I wasn’t taking the class seriously and he made me stay the whole 20 minutes.

I vaguely recall the situation Robert is talking about. I don’t imagine I would have said such a thing to the Asian student, but I might have said something that the Asian student interpreted to mean I suggested he not hang around Robert any longer. I also don’t believe I would have let an Asian student leave detention early while keeping a Black student back. Maybe I made a mistake. I wonder if the point of these situations is not to determine who’s right, but to work to make Robert feel like he is treated fairly by me.

Question: What are some ways Mr. Melvin could improve the class environment?

Tiffany: I think he should follow his own rules and realize what he does. He has his own rules and he needs to follow them and he doesn't.

Smith: Can you give an example?

Tiffany: the consequences- first you get a warning and then your name goes on the board-but half the time you don't get no warning.

Tiffany hasn't said much during the interview, but here she echoes what I had learned from her in her written feedback from the first interview. I struggle with the issue of giving students a warning about their behavior. One of the biggest issues with Tiffany is her talking/socializing during class time. I often count down from five and at that point I write on the board the names of students who are still talking. I consider the countdown the warning. I gather Tiffany feels I should give her an individual warning before writing her name on the board. I feel I could address this confusion by clarifying the rule to the class.

Cheryl: When its white kids- he say you get three checks by your name before you go to the office and when its black kids you get two checks.

Sure enough, there are times when I do not send kids to the office when they receive a third check by there name (as is the rule). I do feel pressure from the office not to send students down. If a student has two checks and does something minor, I have put a check next to their name and not sent them out. This feels logical to me, but I can see how it seems strange to the students.

Question: How do you feel when you get detention or a referral from Mr. Melvin?

Brittany: I, uh, I get nasty.

Sarae: I bring out my colors.

Smith: What do you mean by that?

Shanice: Yeah-at first I don't be acting like that, but then when he puts my name on the board and he want to do me wrong and the white kids...

The students here expressed their emotional reaction to receiving a punishment from me. I have always noticed this and often feel that my punishments do not accomplish stopping student behavior. The punishments instead incite anger and more rebellion. I wonder if in these moments if the racial tension increases. Perhaps, any tension between us becomes defined in racial terms. Sarae's comment that she "brings out her colors" certainly could imply a racial undertone to her reaction.

Smith: What about other kids who get detention?

Shanice: They don't get it!

Cheryl: Or they don't come.

Sarae: Yeah- his rule is that if you don't do the detention by Tuesday-you have administrative detention (1 hour) and there was a whole bunch of Asians on the list and only black people got detention.

I do struggle with getting students to serve their detention for me. In fact, I am troubled that so many of my students receive detention and it can seem overwhelming to

ensure that they all serve it. I often hear excuses/explanations from students such as: they have an after-school program to attend, their parents pick them up right after school, etc. I established a firm deadline to clear up this problem. I am flexible with students in allowing them to serve detention another day if they have a legitimate excuse. It is interesting that my flexibility can be interpreted as preferential treatment/racism by African-American students. It is interesting to note the different perspectives of Shanice and Sarae. Shanice feels non-black students do not receive detention (which is not true). Sarae acknowledges that Asian kids were on the detention list, but she feels only black students were referred to administrative detention when they didn't serve my detention.

The class period is ending and the interview comes to a sudden close. Various students say “good-bye” to me on the tape as they walk out of the room. Tiffany and Robert leave with these comments:

Tiffany: I think he is kind of racist but he just don't know it.

Robert: Know it! (at the same time as Tiffany)

I would like to follow with Tiffany on this comment. Has the discussion of all of my behavior led her to the conclusion that I am racist? Is this a chance to get at me, be mean to be because they don't like their teachers?

Students written recollections of interview that wasn't taped

Below is the information the students provided in a written recollection of the group interview that was not recorded. Some of the information is similar, but there are slight differences. Also, as students recorded recollections of what they and other students said during the interview, the comments cannot be attributed to one person.

Definition of Racism / Why Does Racism Exist?

Human beings judge other people on the way they look and the color of their skin.

A student comments that racism involves judging other people.

Racism started during time of slavery and hasn't stopped.

People were trained to treat each other badly back in the time of slavery.

Why did whites treat blacks badly during time of slavery?

Racism began when whites came to American and mistreated Native Americans.

Students recall a discussion of the origins of racism being linked to the time of slavery or perhaps to the treatment of the Native Americans.

Treat others the way you want to be treated

Racism because races raised differently

Racism because of what is taught at home (2 students wrote this)

Relationship to White Teachers

Teachers demean students' vocabulary

This comment was repeated in 2nd interview.

Teachers should be more strict with “bad kids”

Student expresses frustration that students with bad behavior disrupt the class.

Teachers should try and help kids more

Teachers act evil to black person

Relationship with Mr. Melvin

I should be more reasonable

I should follow my own rules-(4 students)

Four students made this comment that I do not consistently enforce classroom rules. As I mentioned earlier, I agree that I need to be more consistent with enforcing the rules. I don't see that my inconsistency is related to racism or favoritism, but it may be the case, or may seem to be the case to the students.

For discipline, I always write black students names in black marker on the board (2 students I should treat everyone the same

I play favorites (2 students)

I treat black people differently

I am prejudiced

I pick certain students to hand out papers

I don't practice what I preach

I plan lessons

These comments mirror what was said by students during the taped interview.

Students Written Reflections on Interview

As in Case # 1, the students wrote down their reflections and impressions of participating in the group interview. I was encouraged that all of the students enjoyed the process and appreciated being able to share their views. Some of their responses were:

Brittany: The best part was when we got to talk about the teachers and got to say what we felt. The funny people had important things to say and it made sense. I thought it was fun and would love to do it again.

Tiffany: I understood the questions but didn't answer. I'm not all black. The best part was the whole thing because we got to say what we felt.

Ashley (did not speak in interview) : The best part was the different teachers you get to talk about.

Shanice: The reaction I had was a shocked reaction. I felt really good because I got to express how I felt about racism. The whole interview was my best part. I got to talk about the way I feel to be treated. I learned you just have to deal with people and their racism. Mr. Melvin is doing this to see how kids think people are racist.

All of these girls feel the best part was being able to speak their feelings. I have the impression that these thoughts were building up over time and it felt good to release them. As I mentioned earlier, Ms. Smith, the interviewer, felt that the students were less engaged during the second interview as it may not have seemed as stimulating to share their feelings a second time. These interview reflections were written after the first interview. Shanice described that she was shocked at being able to discuss racism and teachers in an open forum. She also interprets my research correctly as being aimed to discover how students perceive racism.

Cheryl - It was an exciting experience to do being in another class and having the opportunity to talk about how you feel and how much your race means to you. I liked it because it was a warm chatter and a place where you could express yourself without getting into trouble. I believe Mr. Melvin is doing it to see how he could become a better teacher. We thought it was unacceptable to stereotype students for no reason even though they may not know they did such a thing. It counts towards someone's feelings even though they thought it didn't. It will add up one day.

Cheryl emphasizes it was important to talk about what her race means to her. She felt the conversation was warm and you could express yourself without getting into

trouble. She states that even though teachers may be unaware of their stereotyping, it still hurts students' feelings. She observes that resentment and bitterness add up, perhaps predicting an explosion "some day" in the future. Her comment makes me consider that African-American students at a young age of twelve or thirteen may already be carrying around much resentment due to white racism. This could explain the strong reaction against me and my actions in the classroom.

Sarae -I didn't know so many people were going to be there. Mr. Melvin is doing this so he can find out how we feel and what he can do better in the future.

Dejeune - The interview was great to participate in. I felt comfortable because I was in a room with people that had respect for others and people's answers. The best part was when everyone was talking about how teachers treat you unfairly. I think Mr. Melvin should follow his own rules if he wants respect from his class. Mr. Melvin is doing this to learn to treat everyone the same. In the interview it was great to learn how blacks treat whites, and how whites treat blacks, what is basically racism.

Sarae was impressed with the amount of people attending the interview. Dejeune appreciated that there was an atmosphere of respect in the room. She also enjoyed being about to talk about teachers. She felt like she learned a lot from the interview and also observed that racism can also occur in the way Blacks treat Whites.

Case# 3 – Mid-Year Evaluation of Class

I asked students to complete a survey evaluating the class at the mid point of the year. These are selected responses of the African-American students.

What are some things you dislike about the class?

In addition to dislikes related to classroom curriculum (don't like reading, journaling, homework), a student wrote "nobody pays attention unless topics are 'clean' and related to real life". I recall many African-American students enjoying an article from the local paper about "Tennis Shoe Pimps." This article talked about how girls are getting involved with prostitution at an earlier and younger boys are acting as pimps. The article highlighted the dangers and problems of prostitution. Also, five of thirty African-American students in the two classes remarked that they disliked the behavior of other students in the class. The students who wrote this are high achievers and seem to resent others disrupting their learning. Three specific criticisms of me were; I don't hear students side of story, I don't follow the consequences I set for breaking the rules, and I ignore ("let slide") the bad behavior of certain students.

If you were teacher, what would be some ways you would change the class?

If allowed to be the teacher, students generally responded they would have more "fun" activities and privileges (parties, field trips, free time, more bathroom breaks, playing the radio, less homework, movies on Friday). My response to these suggestions is that they are unrealistic and not conducive to a successful classroom. Their responses remind me of their description of their favorite teachers. A white male colleague at school told me he does not allow free time in his class because he feels it discourages students from treating the classroom seriously. In my classroom, I feel I give students free time without calling it "free time" (i.e.-allowing students to walk around the room and giving them more time between transitions). I have occasionally arranged parties in

class, but have often afterwards felt taken advantage of because the students misbehaved and did not fully appreciate the effort and expense I put into the party. This year, I have offered the chance of a party as an incentive for good behavior, but the students have not earned it. We have also discussed a class trip, but I have again made this dependent on good behavior and the students have cooperated. With the goal of building class community, I would like to plan a class trip before the end of this year, despite the fact that their behavior has not been good overall.

Students made two comments related to class discipline stating they would be “mean enough to make checks (students name on board) count” and would have parent conferences with the students who talk back to the teacher. Here a student recognizes having their name written on the board does not deter student bad behavior and feels he/she would act meaner as the teacher. The other student shows a distain for students talking back to the teacher. I have been told by many students in my teaching experience that I am too nice and need to be more strict.

What are some suggestions you would give to Mr. Melvin to improve the class?

Students’ responses to this question were much the same as to the previous one. One student responded that “I should say smart things to kids when speaking to them in front of the whole class.” I interpret this to mean I should be careful how I speak to students in the whole class setting, particularly in a conflict. Many colleagues have suggested that it is better to speak to certain students about behavior one on one as the student may react more defiantly in front of the whole class. Perhaps I incite the students to “gang up” on me when I confront them in the whole class setting. Another student commented, “I should go away for a week because I look stressed and I yell too much.” I unfortunately read her comment as spring break was approaching and I was faced with the task of completing the bulk of this paper. I also struggle with the amount I yell in the class in order to get students’ attention. Another student wrote, “don’t let these kids get to your head- keep smiling.” It is great to feel supported.

What are some of Mr. Melvin’s strengths that he should keep?

The responses to this question were brief. One student commented that a strength of mine was putting students’ names on the board to manage behavior. Another student wrote that I am able to answer questions that the students ask me. I was glad to read this and don’t remember a student making this observation about me previously. Finally, a student commented that she thought I had a lot of patience. Since entering the teaching profession, many have told me they thought I would be a good middle school teacher because they felt I possessed a lot of patience as I would not become easily frustrated. Sometimes I have wondered if I have too much patience and this allows students to feel they can misbehave.

What would be your advice to a 6th Grader who will have Mr. Melvin’s class next year?

Students’ responses here were also varied. Several students wrote that I am “mean sometimes and nice other times.” They also wrote the class is “fun, but sometimes boring” and “exciting, but difficult.” I do feel this year I have had to be more strict and “mean” than in the past as I have wanted to have a more efficient classroom. On the negative side, students wrote that I do not let students talk and I do not allow free time. I do watch carefully to see that students do not socialize (when inappropriate) and I do not

give explicit free time both because I do not want these liberties to be taken advantage of. These comments in connection with earlier comments about student dislikes in the class lead me to consider ways I can give students some of what they want in the class and still feel it is a successful classroom. Doing this would be to give students some power and not feel that I am giving away my authority.

Case # 4 – Journal Entries: Students Describe Their Favorite Teacher and the Ideal “Dream” Teacher

In a journal entry describing their favorite teacher, African-American students describe some common qualities. In their descriptions, the students did not specify the race of their favorite teacher. Students described teachers that gave them special privileges such as: parties at the end of each month for birthdays, letting students out of class early, letting students go outside if they were done with work early, and giving prizes for successful work. They also wrote about teachers who went out of their way to help them. These teachers would, “give me help anytime I needed it”, and would “help you do the math, not just tell you to do it.” One student described a second grade teacher who helped her read and felt, “if it wasn’t for her, I’d still be in second grade.” She also added, “I want to be a doctor and I still have trouble reading.” I interpret this as a cry for help and I feel the responsibility to be there for her as she describes.

In a second class, students wrote in their journal describing the qualities of an ideal teacher or described who their ideal teacher would be. Several students wrote that they envisioned their ideal teacher being young, “because they could understand where kids are coming from.” Regarding classroom discipline, the ideal teacher would, “treat everyone the same”, “didn’t let anyone slide” and “treat the kids the way you’d treat your kids.” That last comment evokes Lisa Delpit’s emphasis in *Other People’s Children* which is that white teachers do not relate to their students as if they were their own. Out of seven journal entries, only two students specified that their ideal teacher would be Black. One boy wrote, “my ideal teacher would be a woman, 20 years old, would treat me like a king and would give me a pizza party at her house every Friday.” One girl wrote, “my ideal teacher would be a black male (because I’ve never had one), aged 55, would teach different things, would have pride and would kick out all the bad kids.” This same girl Amber in the group interview talked about how her father had felt her white male teachers were racist and how she, after receiving a bad grade from one such teacher, also concluded these teachers were racist.

Findings and Conclusions

Student responses in this research are varied, but there are some common themes that emerge. In terms of their relationship to me and to their other white teachers, most of the students described an experience of racism. It is difficult to determine if the students who did not speak during the interviews were silent because they had not experienced racism, or they did not feel like sharing to the group. David, a participant in the interview, was the only student who said he did not participate because he felt he had not experienced racism in society and in his relationship with his teachers.

As the researcher for this study, I faced the dilemma of analyzing comments students made about me as their teacher with as much objectivity as possible. I acknowledge any impression I have will be subjective and may reflect my own biases and inability to understand what the students were saying about me. In addition, I have

summarized and tried to make sense of the comments students made about their impressions and experience with white teachers in general. I also may be biased in this analysis as I am a member of the group that the students were commenting on. Nevertheless, I have mined through the students' responses and tried to understand some common themes as they relate to me and to white teachers. I recognize that my initial reaction to many of the student comments, both in this research and when these perceptions are voiced in the classroom, is to dismiss them as unreasonable, or to see them as students "playing the race card" to avoid responsibility for their behavior. Using the literature and the advice of scholars as a guide, I have tried to assume that these student voices are valid and have something to tell me and other white teachers. Certainly some of the student perceptions seem more credible than others and many of their comments may be complete fabrications. All adults and certainly middle school teachers are familiar with the tendency of adolescents to tell a tall tale or an outright lie. However, I have noticed my tendency and the tendency of my white colleagues to be quick to dismiss students' perceptions of racism. Returning to Tatum's image of the cafeteria table, African-American students flock there because their viewpoint is likely to be heard, not dismissed. I recognize that being labeled racist causes a strong reaction in me and I feel the impulse to correct it or dismiss it. Regarding my teaching and my classroom, these are some conclusions from the study.

Conclusions Related to Experience in My Classroom

Relating back to Benokraitis and Feagin's scheme of discrimination (overt, covert and subtle) presented earlier, none of the student responses to my research indicated they observed any overt racist actions in my behavior. Many of their perceptions of my racist behavior could be categorized as either covert (consciously racist behavior) or subtle (subconsciously racist behavior). For example, although students quoted overtly racist comments from other white teachers, no student recalled that I ever said something overtly racist. Interestingly, when students have described covert racism by me in the classroom, I can only understand that as subtle racism as I feel I was not knowingly treating a student based on their race. These are the common themes that emerged about my treatment of African American students.

I treat African-American students unfairly. Students give numerous examples of how I treat African-American students differently from other racial groups in the classroom. Most of these comments are related to how I enforce the rules of the classroom. For example, I will reprimand and put the name on the board of an African-American student for interrupting me when I am speaking to the class and will let a non-African-American student off with a warning. With African-American students, I strictly enforce rules about when to serve detention and with other groups I will simply let them off. All of these are examples of students' perceptions of covert, intentional racist behavior. I can only interpret my actions as subtle racist behavior because I do not feel it was my intention to discriminate. Also, one student felt I used a different color marker (black) when writing students names on the board for punishment.

I use excessive anger towards African-American students. This observation came up in numerous cases. In Case #2, Brittany explained that I will be having a bad day and will send students out of the class for "stupid stuff" (i.e.-tapping a pencil on a desk). Sarae

commented that I yell too much. Another student said she felt I hate her and another African-American student in the class. One student complained I treat her badly when she is late. Based on all of these comments, I wonder if my anger in the classroom is evidence of racism? I acknowledge I have shown more anger my teaching this year and I generally feel this is directed either to the whole class or to individual students based on their behavior. Clearly, some African-American students feel it is directed at them because of their race.

Reflecting on my classroom experiences, I have described a feeling of sometimes being “ganged up” on by the African-American students. A well known classroom discipline author, Fred Jones (2001), has described teachers going into a “fight or flight” reaction when they feel threatened by their students or feel they are losing control of the class. Because I perceive a select group of African-American students as doing the “ganging up”, it might cause me to react or “fight back” with anger. (Is flight a possible option for a teacher?)

Lisa Delpit (1995) writes of an African-American middle school student who describes to her that a majority of the white teachers at his school are “afraid of black kids.” Does my anger and fear of being ganged up signify that I am afraid of my African-American students? This year, there have been three incidences where I heard or saw African-American boys threaten me during a conflict. These threats were non-verbal in one case and in the two other cases were muttered underneath the student’s breath. In all cases, I felt sure I had been threatened and referred the boys to the administration. In the instances where the boys had spoken under their breath, the boys claimed I had misunderstood their language (they explained they were talking about someone else). I felt I had understood the situation clearly. After this, one of these boys cautioned his classmates on their use of language, “even if you’re not saying it to them; if they *think* you’re saying it to them, then that is bad enough and you can get in trouble.” Overall, comparing the consistency of student responses to my own reflections, I can conclude that I do react with greater anger to African-American students.

Receiving a punishment from me will often spark anger and greater defiance from African-American students. Students’ defiance can increase when they feel they have been treated unfairly. When asked about her reaction to receiving a referral or detention, Sarae stated that she “brings out her colors” and responds with defiance. Brittany said she gets “nasty”. From a perspective of traditional classroom discipline, teachers should merely continue to consistently enforce the explicit rules of the classroom to clearly demonstrate the boundaries of student behavior. Being adolescents, the students will naturally test these boundaries to know how firm they are and to know what is expected. However, if a student perceives the teacher to be racist and/or the classroom rules to be unfair or inconsistently enforced, the defiance will continue. I conclude from the students’ comments that I need to both demonstrate anti-racist behavior and to consistency enforce the classroom rules and expectations (these may be one in the same).

Some allegations that students make of racism and/or unfair treatment can be unfounded, but could signify another important issue. Listening to and reading student comments about me as a teacher, I felt certain comments were blatantly false and perhaps said in jest. In reviewing these responses, I felt they often could still offer me

insight into my behavior. For example, a student commented I spent more time in class on “my religion” which she felt was Christianity. At first I felt this was an inaccurate comment, but I later I felt I could learn something from it. I do consider Christianity to be the religion I grew up with, but I feel more aligned with Buddhism as a current faith. This year in class, however, we did complete a unit on Medieval Europe which included an extensive study of the Medieval Church. Because this unit involved entirely a study of a white culture, I can see how the student might have assumed I deliberately chose that unit. I realized I perhaps did not explain extensively to the class the reasoning behind this choice of the curriculum. I felt I was merely following the standards and the students should go along with it. In retrospect, I realize I have a responsibility to explain to the students why we are covering certain curriculum. It may be impossible to solve this dilemma as students of color may react negatively to a white teacher teaching them European history. For this, I can look to inspiration in Gary Howard’s model of white anti-racist teaching. In his view, white teachers can be effective teachers for students of color even when dealing in topics of a racist past.

Another example of an unreasonable student allegation is when a girl claimed I do not like names that start with the letter “E”. Initially, such comments to me demeaned or made other comments the students made seem less credible. Thinking through this further, the comment made by Elizabeth indicates that she is somehow dissatisfied with our relationship and is interpreting this in racial terms. I can easily dispute the fact that I do not like students whose names begin with “E” and in fact this observation does not imply racism. However, it is evidence that Elizabeth has a problem with me as her teacher. I could try to disprove this comment to her, or I could look at the deeper issue.

My teaching style mostly does not match African-American students’ description of an ideal teacher. The student responses in the interview, in the class evaluation and in their journal writing show that my teaching mostly does not match their description of an ideal teacher. In the interview, Cheryl described a male African-American teacher she had who “made learning fun,” who played games and “didn’t always make everything about grades.” Brittany wrote in her evaluation that kids will be bored unless, “you connect learning to real life.” Responding to how they would teach the class or what suggestions they would offer me, students said they would have more fun activities such as parties, movies on Friday, prizes, free time, etc. In my own estimation, I agree that I strive to keep a serious atmosphere in the classroom. Perhaps these fun activities might imply to me a closer relationship with the students and the African-American students might interpret that I want to keep a distance. I also fear that in giving the students these freedoms, I might lose authority and respect in the classroom. My actions and stringent approach may have the opposite effect.

In addition, in describing their ideal teacher, African-American students described teachers who go out of their way to help students and show that they care. This confirms many scholars’ viewpoint that African-American learning style is rooted in context and relationships and no learning can take place unless there is an established relationship of caring and trust between teacher and student (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In his study of his relationship as a white teacher to his African-American male students, Matt Reider describes how having a personal relationship with his students had a greater effect on student achievement than did culturally specific curriculum modifications he made in

the classroom. Reflecting on my classroom experience with these students, I realize that the predominance of conflict in our relationship makes it difficult to establish this trusting, caring relationship. I recall often that a moment of connection with a student in a class one day can quickly be lost the next day when we have a conflict. Sometimes a dramatic switch could happen in one day. Certainly, the students need to be responsible for their behavior and it is not surprising that any middle student would have difficulty following classroom rules. However, I recognize that specifically with African-American students, the persistence of conflict impedes the development of a caring relationship between us.

Some, not all of the African-American students, find me a racist teacher. I recall the comments of two students as they walked out of the group interview. Tiffany said, “I think Mr. Melvin is racist but he just doesn’t....” As Tiffany was about to finish her sentence, Robert chimed in, “know it!” My reaction upon hearing Tiffany’s comment on the audiotape is defensive. I want to track her down and find out more what she means by her comment. She made her comment, however, at the end of the interview and after a long discussion of student impressions of racism in many contexts. If she made the comment, what can I do about it?

Considering Benokraitis and Feagin’s scheme of discrimination, the students labeled my behavior as both covert and subtle racism. I feel more comfortable accepting guilt of subtle racism (unequal treatment that is visible but so internalized as to be considered routine in bureaucratized settings), but accepting that my behavior is covertly racist, that I act consciously with malicious intent towards African-American students, is harder to accept. I recognize my hesitancy to accept the label as being racist is perhaps linked back to my earlier description of exploration of White identity. In discussing my research with classmates and friends, some have responded, “yes, of course you have encountered a problem in your teaching; all white people are racist.” Based on an understanding that all white people have benefited from white privilege, this could held to be true. Within a perspective that all white people are racist where there is space for individual attitudes and perspectives. Is a white person racist who has entered Gary Howard’s “transformationalist” identity orientation; a person has “committed themselves to a lifelong process of dismantling the assumption of rightness, the luxury of ignorance, and the legacy of privilege that have been the foundations of White hegemony for centuries?” Again, my eagerness to answer this question might reflect my personal unease with being labeled racist and my desire to escape it.

Conclusions Related to White Teachers in General

Some African-American students, based on previous experiences, hold negative generalized attitudes about white teachers. The students described a wide range of racist behavior by their white teachers. When asked how they felt about having white teachers, students responded that they feel like they were being judged. Cheryl responded that upon seeing at the beginning of the year that her teacher was white thought to herself, “here we go again.” She continued saying that she liked having African-American teachers because she felt they would, “have your back” and keep her interests in mind. In describing her ideal teacher, one student wrote that her ideal teacher would

treat their students like they would treat their own kids. African-American students did not feel they would be treated like their white teacher's own kids.

African-American students reported white teachers making overtly racist comments. Many students reported that they had encountered white teachers who made overtly racist comments to them such as “all you black kids are like (acting badly)” or, “Oh no, not another black girl, she’s going to be bad” or, “I only trust Asians.” My initial response upon hearing the students’ responses was to refute them or to believe the students were making them up. Especially when students attributed some of the comments to my current colleagues, I had a hard time accepting their validity. However, based on further discussions with colleagues at school, I have heard colleagues confirm that they have heard both white teachers and teachers of color make overtly racist comments about students. Also, for the purpose of this research, I lean toward holding student perspectives as valid in order to better understand the sentiments behind their comments.

African-American students do not feel they are treated fairly by white teachers. This mirrors the findings discussed above regarding my classroom. In describing a non-racist white teacher, in several cases students described teachers who, when using discipline, would send both students involved out of the class, not relying on judgment to determine fault.

White teachers do not praise African-American students’ intelligence. Students describe experiences where white teachers do not acknowledge their intelligence. Several students described situations where their white teachers would not call on them to give answers when their hands were raised. Cheryl described a teacher who said she probably was not smart enough to understand a word the teacher had used. Brittany described a teacher who sat all of the Asian students in the front of the class and all of the African-American students in the back. The teacher’s excuse, according to Brittany was that the Asian students needed glasses. The students’ responses here closely connect to the theories of many scholars (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2001) who claim that a major factor contributing to the low achievement of students of color is low expectations by their teachers (who are predominantly white). Delpit (1995) reports that research has shown that African-American girls are rewarded for nurturing behavior while white girls are rewarded for academic behavior. In reading their responses, I am shocked how exactly students confirm what has been proposed as theory.

When African-American students perceive racism from their teachers, their response is to shut down and not participate. Students describe strong reactions to racism by their teachers. Elizabeth said that after hearing an overtly racist comment from her teacher, she decided “I can’t be in this class.” Upon seeing she had a white teacher for the year and remembering past experiences, Cheryl thought to herself, “here we go again.” In describing the reaction of African-Americans at all ages to bias and discrimination, Delpit writes, “bias can actually cause lowered performance for those who are its victims, possibly as a result of unexpressed anger, alienation, low morale and other mental and physical symptoms of stress. It is easy to anticipate how such lowered performance can readily lead to even greater stereotyping and bias, thus increasing the minority person’s sense of alienation and frustration.” (FN-116)

Cheryl's experience poses a dilemma in that she has assumed she will be treated unfairly by her new white teacher based solely on past experiences. In this light, it is the responsibility of white teacher of color to acknowledge and accept that students may arrive with these stereotypes and demonstrate to their students that they will be treated fairly.

Conclusions Related to the Interview and Data Collection Process

African-American middle school students are emotional about the issue of racism and are eager to share their views about it. I mentioned I was nervous in bringing up the topic of my research with the students. When I finally did bring it up, I was surprised by the interest and the enthusiasm students had for the research. It was clear students had a lot of pent up feelings about the issue. In their written reflections about the group interview, most students commented that they appreciated that they were "allowed" to voice their feelings about their teachers in particular. They also commented how they enjoyed the interview because everyone respected each other and respected what each other had to say. Interestingly, my colleague who did the interview, Ms. Smith, commented that the students who had to return to do the interview a second time seemed less enthusiastic voicing their comments a second time. She mentioned she had to jog their memories to remind them of comments they had made previously. This confirms my impression that in the first interview, students were excited by the novelty of being able to share their true feelings about their teachers.

Some students in particular seemed to be holding thoughts inside with regards to their opinions of me as a teacher. In the first interview, Elizabeth was disappointed to learn that any comments about me were not going to be recorded. When Ms. Smith explained that this was done to allow students to feel safe making comments about their teacher, Elizabeth responded, "but he needs to know."

Giving students the opportunity to discuss racial issues and share feelings in a single race and multi-racial group can reduce racial tension and promote a more successful school experience for all students. Again, many of the students expressed that they appreciated being able to share their feelings. Simply giving the students the chance to voice their feelings about race, and how it affects their relationship with their students, can in itself benefit the class environment. Ms. Smith reported that a week after the first group interview, a participant came up to her to report that things "were much better" in my class. I do not know who the student was and cannot imagine what change she would have noticed. I suspected she felt better knowing she had voiced her feelings to me. Beverly Tatum (1997) reports several successful experiences in schools where African-American students were able to gather in a school setting to discuss the complex issues around developing identity as an African-American adolescent. In these groups, students were able to discuss the difficulties they were having in school and discussed issues around stereotypes of black identity, such as the idea that doing well in school is "acting white." Giving students the opportunity to voice their opinions about their teachers as a group also allows students to examine their own beliefs and beliefs of their peers. In a coordinated program involving all students, the issue of race is brought out into the open and students and teachers alike would benefit from the process.

Final Reflection - How have I changed?

Looking back over this process, I feel there is much for me to take away from it. Certainly, I feel I understand better the perspective of African-American adolescents and what would motivate them intrinsically and extrinsically to label their teachers racist. In all areas: outside of school, on the school playground, with school administrators, and with their teachers, these students can view situations through the lens of race. Feelings of unfairness and discrimination related to race will arise particularly in a teacher relationship, which is complicated by issues of power and authority. Reading over the transcripts of the student interviews, I was truly touched and saddened by the experiences of racism the students described. Hearing their perspective as a group and hearing the many examples they provided in different contexts, I grew less inclined to refute what they had say, rather I wanted to listen more and learn.

I feel the problems I face with African-American students are related to both my personal approach and to the content of the class curriculum (and these are interrelated). On a personal level, based on student comments and on my own racial/ethnic exploration, I realize I may exhibit covert and subtle racist behavior that interferes in creating a positive relationship with the students. I am aware that I have contentious relationships with many of my African-American students (as evidenced by the fact that many students earn punishments in my class and a majority of these students are African-American). These contentious, negative relationships contribute to the students' lack of motivation in the class and ultimately cause them to be unsuccessful in school. Before this research, I felt I was completely justified in my approach and was merely issuing just punishment for their behavior. I saw the situation as their problem and awaited the day when they changed their behavior. I still feel there needs to be explicit classroom rules, but now I feel I need to go the extra steps to gain student buy-in and to have students know that they are respected and valued in the class. In this regard, I can only commit myself to be reflective about my behavior and continuously examine my actions. I feel I can also use the students, my colleagues and others as my advisors in being aware of how I might exhibit racist behavior.

I also understand how I can exhibit subtle racist behavior in my choices of curriculum content. Thinking of Ladson-Billings' model of "reflective practice," I realize that I have a responsibility to fix my teaching to tap into the students' natural desire to learn. I cannot always expect to please all students; however, many African-American students commented they did not feel engaged by the class lessons. Reflecting about my choice of curriculum, I realize I have adopted much based on what was done by others, or what I considered "standard 7th Grade curriculum." Thinking of subtle racism as unequal treatment that is visible, but so internalized as to be considered routine, I can see how my choice of curriculum is subtly racist. The problem is not with the students. It is up to me to create a classroom experience that they can buy into, that taps into their knowledge. It is Ladson-Billings' model of culturally relevant teaching.

Also, I learned from the experience of addressing the issue of race in the classroom, not only in the context of subject matter, but as it relates to my relationship as a white teacher to my students of color. Although I focused my research on African-American students, I feel the implications of the research apply to my relationship with all students of color. I realize students will walk into the classroom with a set of assumptions about me based on a variety of factors, including race and I will do the same

with them. Talking about race and how it affects our relationship has done a lot to improve our relationship overall. The research has by no means created a perfect environment, as evidenced by a question asked to me by an African-American student the other day; “if we all come from the same source (early humans in Africa), why do you call us (the N-word)?” Uncomfortably, I gave her an answer stating that early humans lived thousands of years before Europeans started slavery in Africa. Also I pointed out that “I” had not called her the N-word, but I could understand how she connected me to the white race in general. Although this was still an uncomfortable moment, I feel it was less than it might have been as we had already broached the topic of race in our relationship.

I feel the situation of the growing population of students of color in public schools and the predominance of white teacher in the public schools is a problem. Based on my own exploration, I feel many white teachers need to rethink the problem of the failure of so many students of color in school. To review, teachers rarely today exhibit overt racism, but may unknowingly act racist in covert and subtle ways. By placing the onus of success in school entirely upon a student of color, the teacher does not consider their role in making school a positive experience. The deck is indeed stacked against people of color and teachers in a small way have the ability to counteract the effects of racism. Certainly there are many other factors that contribute to student success such as a supportive home life. However, as Kailin has stated, white teachers tend to identify these factors with the effect of “blaming the victim” and missing the fact that real enemy is institutional racism. White teachers need to be less worried about being labeled racist and be less concerned with refuting these allegations when they are voiced by students. Instead, they need to examine their own behavior, both in terms of their interactions with students and in their choices of classroom content to ensure that they are doing everything possible to help students of color succeed.

Epilogue - Personal Story – A Memory from the 8th Grade

I was given detention in last period of the day. It came out of the blue, slam!, from Mr. McGuiness, 8th grade science. I remember a bunch of us were fooling around. What was I doing? Was it egregious? What was I even doing there, did I really have him as a teacher? I remember nothing about the classroom except for getting detention that one day. *What? Detention?* I had a baseball game that afternoon. I was scheduled to pitch for the Junior Varsity High School team for the first time. It was quite an honor. *What? Detention? That day? What had I done?*

I am in detention after-school with another teacher Mr. McKim (I gather he ran the detention). “Can I please go Mr. McKim? The bus for the game will be leaving soon.” He sits looking down at his papers as he continues to grade. “Nope, sorry, you have detention until...” (I can’t remember what time). I’m pacing around the room. “John, sit down and do some homework, if you need something to do I’ll give you something”. *Aww maan, I am so anxious and he’s not letting me leave.* “Nope, nope,” he responds. Finally, the time is up and I run out of there to the gym. I meet the gym coach Mr. Bubb who gives me the news. It’s too late. The bus has gone. The team has left for the game. There’s no other way to get there. “But Mr. Bubb,” I say, tears streaming down my face, “I was supposed to pitch today.” “Sorry Johnny,” he said, “Its OK, you’ll get ‘em next time.” Did I get the chance again? I can’t remember.

Somehow, this story emerged in my memory as I processed these responses from students about being treated fairly. The story reminds me of what it feels like not to be treated fairly. As a middle school teacher, I struggle with ensuring that my classroom is orderly and students abide by the rules. However, I do not want to be Mr. McGuiness, coldly slapping students with detention as punishments for their behavior when students are not aware of what they have done. Young students will think of fairness in their own terms, as we adults will. We want to set limits for student’s behavior, but we don’t want to crush their spirits. I wonder why I have such a vivid memory of that day. I feel I barely remember anything else from the 8th grade. Perhaps that experience caused me to “learn my lesson,” but as I remember it, I wasn’t treated fairly. As teachers, it is important to remember the impact we can have on students.

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Case # 4 - Mid-Year Evaluations

What are some things you dislike about the class?

Journals

Disliked everything-2 students

Reading

Nobody pays attention unless topics are “clean”-relating to real life

Reading novels

I put black kids name on the board

Behavior of other students-5 students

I don't hear student's side of story

I don't follow first rule of consequences

I let slide behavior of other students

If you were teacher, what would be some ways you would change the class?

Party at the end of every month

Movies on Friday-3 students

Less homework

Allow eating

Allow bathroom break between two hour block-3 students

More free time

Allow radio to be on

Put all the bad kids in another class-2 students

Make learning fun

Have conference with parents of trouble-makers about back-talking

Free day on Friday

Field trips-3 students

Be mean enough to make checks count

Play games

What are some suggestions you would give to Mr. Melvin to improve the class?

Give free time

Change homework-2 students

Change seating, choose seats, seating suggestion

Say smart things to kids when speaking to them in front of whole class

Be more patient

Less homework

More writing

Follow rules

Make learning fun so kids won't be distracted

Send back-talking kids to office

Talk to student after you put name on board

I should go away for a week because I looked stressed and I yell too much.

Don't let kids get to my head-keep smiling

Names on the board ain't working

What are some of Mr. Melvin's strengths that he should keep?

Putting people's names on board

I can answer questions

Patience

What would be your advice to a 6th Grader who will have Mr. Melvin's class next year?

Students's responses here were also varied. Several students wrote that I am "mean sometimes and nice other times." They also wrote the class is "fun, but sometimes boring" and "exciting but difficult." I do feel this year I have had to be more strict and "mean" than in the past as I have wanted to have a more efficient classroom. On a negative side, students wrote that I don't let people talk and I don't allow free time. Again, I feel I watch carefully to see that students do not socialize too much and I do not give explicit free time both because I do not want these liberties to be taken advantage of. These comments in connection with earlier comments about student dislikes in the class lead me to consider ways I can give students some of what they want in the class and still feel it is a successful classroom. This would be giving students some power and not feel like I am giving away my authority.

I'm mean sometimes and nice other times – 2 students

Great experience up ahead

No free time

Doesn't let people talk

Don't get put in a bad group

Class is fun but sometimes boring

My class is easy and hard

Boring

Too much homework

Exciting but difficult