READING *THE FRIENDSHIP* AND TALKING ABOUT RACE

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*This study documents literature discussions between groups of teacher education students in two geographically and demographically different universities. Students from an education methods course at each site discussed *The Friendship* by Mildred Taylor with one another as part of a distance reader response project. The project was designed to promote discussion of multicultural historical fiction among and between urban students of color at one site and mainly White suburban students from the second site. Additional goals include increasing computer literacy as prospective teachers access the WebCT online course management system and have regular conversations in this medium.*

Keywords: *multicultural education; Web-mediated discussion; literature response; teacher education; literacy methods; social studies methods*

As teachers we need to assess our own views about race.

—Teacher education student, urban campus

The authors of this study are two White teacher educators working in separate universities with racially different student bodies. We share a commitment to helping teacher education students and the children in their classrooms understand the need to reach across lines of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation in their classrooms and in their lives. We use children's literature in our classrooms to help teachers and children think about these differences. Crucial questions that have emerged in our teacher education classes relate to how, when, and even whether to teach about race and racism in elementary school. In this study, the authors examine how

the race and class identities of a group of teacher education students affect their perceptions of a particular piece of children's literature and their ideas about teaching. The online discussions of these education students' responses to the text became the data for this study.

Many teachers and education students are resistant to talking about race and class with children. They often experience such discussions as intimidating. Beverly Tatum (1999) points out that many people, both Black and White, are taught not to discuss race as children. As a consequence, as adults they do not know what to say, and they may become uncomfortable with these discussions. A number of educators have worked to create multicultural classrooms where racial and ethnic conflicts are openly addressed, even with very young children (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 1998; Tenorio, 1994). Curriculum in these classrooms often draws on children's literature with multicultural and anti-bias themes.

In this article, we document our attempt to address race and racism with teacher education students in online discussions, using children's literature that highlights race and segregation. To provide a shared context for the classes participating in the book discussions, the authors assigned the Kohl (1996) article "What's Wrong With the Rosa Parks Myth?" This article discusses the atmosphere of the early days of the civil rights movement and the role that groups of individuals, working together, had in fostering this movement. In each of the two methods classes, other readings and activities also provided a framework for recognizing diversity. These included the writings of Lisa Delpit (1996) and research presentations that examined second language learning, in the language arts methods class, and a multidisciplinary unit on the civil rights movement in the social studies methods class.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As discussed above, young adult and children's multicultural literature are often used by educators in their courses in the belief that literature with diverse cultural, racial, and class perspectives is an invaluable resource for helping teacher education students and the

children in their classrooms begin conversations about diversity (Mitchell-Pierce, 1994; Wilkinson & Kido, 1997). The authors of this article concur and use multicultural fiction and nonfiction as the basis for our courses. For this study, based on our language arts and social studies methods courses, we focus on books about groups in the United States whose experiences have typically been marginalized (Sims-Bishop, 1997).

In addition to providing space for conversations that many find uncomfortable, using literature with diverse perspectives can enable White preservice students to recognize and enter into the experiences of different others (Authors, 2003; Beach, 1997). For students of color, the rich multicultural texts currently available celebrate and normalize marginalized cultures and lifestyles. Engagement in reading multicultural historical fiction enables both White students and students of color to situate themselves in historical contexts (Gerwin & Manolios, 2001). The text itself is a crucial element in the reading transaction. Studies of multicultural texts in literature discussion groups indicate that multicultural realistic and historical fiction have the potential to further stimulate personal responses and foreground critique (Moller, 2001; Taxel, 1991).

TALKING ABOUT BOOKS

The interchanges that occur in book discussions influence and expand response opportunities for members of the reading group. Readers may begin to renegotiate and situate their identities in reaction to a text, a process that can contribute to the polyphony of response (Broughton, 2002; Enciso, 1997). Collaborative talk about books enables readers to make sense of the world; this talk about texts makes the meaning process visible to readers, as well as to those who work with them (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1986).

Literacy research indicates that three conditions are necessary to provide opportunities for challenging beliefs and extending critique for all readers: engagement, personal reflection, and an element of disequilibrium (Enciso, 1997; Lewis, 1997; Moller, 2001). The discourse of a literature discussion group provides opportunities for engagement as readers share interpretations and explore personal connections. Alternate interpretations and perspectives encourage

group members to reflect on their own reading and life experiences. As discussants construct their response in the context of the text and the response group, they make predictions both about the literature and about how the world works. These new ideas cause readers to reinterpret these predictions and to constantly modify initial hypotheses (Bakhtin, 1981).

A third essential condition for reflection is disequilibrium. Readers in homogeneous groups are unlikely to raise issues of race or to challenge one another's views or comfort levels (Frankenberg, 1993; McIntyre, 1997). Therefore, it is crucial that reader response discussions take place in racially diverse groups. Forming such groups becomes a challenge in our increasing segregated schools and communities, and teacher educators have begun to explore means to create experiences of diversity (Merryfield, 2001; Rogers, 1997; Wolf, Ballentine, & Hill, 1999).

Statistics reveal that 9 out of 10 teachers are White, and students of color make up 76% of students in America's 20 central cities (Johnson, 2002). It is critical that teachers are prepared to work with these students and that education programs challenge the prevailing discourses of Whiteness. Courses for pre-service and in-service teachers can become sites for fostering debate and engaged resistance.

Using Web-mediated discussions adds another dimension to attempts to create genuine dialogue about race, class, and history among otherwise isolated groups of teacher education students. In earlier work, the authors of this study looked at the role of children's literature with strong African American protagonists in precipitating discussions of race, class, and sexual orientation in university classrooms. In this study, students from our two separate universities, an urban campus with a predominantly African American and Latina/o student population and a suburban campus with a predominantly White student population, engaged in conversations across racial and class lines in reader response groups via the WebCT online course management system.

In this article, we examine how student racial and class identities affect their perceptions of *The Friendship*, one of a series of children's books written by Mildred Taylor (1998) about the Logan family, an African American family living in Mississippi during the

Great Depression. Through the eyes of the Logan children, readers experience the racial tension and humiliation that circumscribed daily life for African Americans in the segregated South. Readers also experience efforts to resist racism during this era. The publisher recommends this book for children aged 7 to 10, which is equivalent to Grades 2 through 5. However, teacher education students often worry that the violence depicted in the story makes it inappropriate for such young children. Some reject the idea of using the book at all.

For this study, each researcher looked at a different subgroup of students who read and discussed *The Friendship* in intercollegiate reader response groups formed in their classrooms and on the WebCT. Each reader response group was made up of four or five students from each campus. The first reader response group included four Black students and one Asian student from the urban campus, as well as five White students from the suburban campus. The second reader response group included two Black and two Latina students from the urban campus and three White students and one Black student from the suburban campus. Each researcher identified themes that emerged during WebCT conversations. Looking at two groups in this way helps to show the range of responses to this novel.

THEMES

Data from the study included the WebCT postings of students from each campus, as well as the written evaluation papers submitted by all participating students to the professor-researchers at the conclusion of the online discussion group project. The online conversations from the two subgroups were read by each researcher, sorted by topic, and analyzed. Analyses were shared and themes identified. The same process occurred in sorting and analyzing data topics and themes from the students' written evaluations. Ultimately, two subsets of themes were identified, one for each subgroup, as the responses within each group differed substantially.

Three themes characterized the WebCT conversations for the first reader response group. All were specifically related to the events in the text. They are as follows:

- respect
- race and class
- segregation

The themes for the second reader response group were less context-based, moving toward a more global response. They are identified as follows:

- situated response
- collaboration

Interwoven with the themes for each reader response group was the noticeable difficulty some readers had in putting themselves in the context of the time and place of this story. Students from both groups also discussed the use of provocative children's literature: how, when, and even whether to introduce this book to elementary school children.

RESPECT: AUNT CALLIE AND THE WALLACE STORE

Respect for elders is consistently highlighted in the discussion of the first reader response group. This theme first becomes an issue in this short book when Aunt Callie asks the Logan children to get her some headache powder from the Wallace general store. The request creates a dilemma for the children, because they have been warned by their parents to stay away from the Wallace store. At the same time, they have been taught to respect the requests of elders in their community. Mel, a White student from the suburban campus, commented,

Suffice it to say this is not your typical down-home poor country kids' story. It tells the tale of four Black children in Mississippi in the 1930's who dare to defy their parents' warning, and go to a general store run by people their parents say, "don't treat our kind right."

The children were caught in a dilemma. To respect Aunt Callie, they would have to disobey their parents. However, the phrase "dare to defy their parents" reflects a lack of understanding of the extended family structure in African American communities in the Deep South during the Great Depression. Marisol, a Black

student from the urban campus, argues for a different explanation of the trip to the Wallace store. She writes,

I don't think they defied their parents. I felt they were being respectful by going to the store for Aunt Callie. In my culture we were obedient to our elders whether they were relatives or not. I believe that may have been the same type of thing for these children. Saying no to Aunt Callie would have been a sign of disrespect.

Marisol goes on to describe her group's discussion of respect:

Blacks weren't allowed to call a White person by their first names. Imagine how Mr. Tom Bee felt when John Wallace's sons addressed him in several demeaning ways. Although this man was their elder, he wasn't regarded as such.

Mel questions the idea that the Logan children were being respectful. He argues,

I feel that getting the head medicine for Aunt Callie was a convenient excuse, since there must be other stores within a reasonable distance. They went into "forbidden territory" under the guise of assisting an elder that they respected. As we all know, kids are naturally curious.

This somewhat cynical response does not reflect awareness of the constant threat and intimidation that permeated the lives of African Americans in the segregated South. Mel's reasoning about the availability of other stores is not based on anything he actually knows about this place and time. He offers a universal explanation based on his understanding of child development, judging the characters as exhibiting typical childhood curiosity. Marisol, on the other hand, talks of how children were expected to treat their elders when she was a child in Jamaica. Marisol, who is Black, brings personal knowledge to this discussion, and Mel, who is White, suggests that all responses are either a matter of opinion or explained by academic knowledge.

In his next communication, sent after he finished reading the book, Mel takes the issue of respect more seriously. It is not clear what precipitated this change, but it is reasonable to suppose that Mel would feel a little sobered by the way that events played themselves out in this story. Mel comments,

My group met again this evening, and we were struck by how much respect played into the story. It is obvious that Cassie and her siblings have been raised to respect their elders. However, they have also been raised to be wary of others who are likely to disrespect them.

Respect is also a factor in the central conflict of the story. The conflict involves Mr. Tom Bee, an elderly African American man, and John Wallace, the White owner of the Wallace store. Mr. Tom Bee insists on calling John Wallace by his first name, a practice forbidden in the segregated South but that stems from the particular history the two men have with one another. Theresa, a White student from the suburban campus, argues that the issue of respect should apply to John Wallace's treatment of Mr. Tom Bee. She refers to an incident in the Wallace store when Mr. Tom Bee insisted on calling John Wallace "John." Theresa maintains,

He just needed to make a point to his sons and the other men in the store that he as a White man should not be "disrespected." Well, wouldn't you call what John did to Tom Bee disrespectful? After all Tom Bee did for him. Maybe John had to prove to himself that he was a "real White man and should be treated as such, even by Tom Bee."

Theresa's description of how John Wallace treats Mr. Tom Bee reflects an unstated assumption that all people should receive equal treatment, Black as well as White. If it is treated as a moral issue, Theresa's plea may seem reasonable, but as a historical perspective, it is naïve. There was no equal treatment for African Americans under segregation. Theresa's lack of a minimal understanding of the nature of segregation illustrates how difficult it is for teachers and children to place themselves in historical contexts different from their own.

RACE AND CLASS

Race and class make up a second theme that interested this group of readers. Mel, the White student from the suburban campus, finds the White people in the story to be unattractive:

Funny, but the White people in the story appear to be pretty stupid, even though they clearly believe that they are superior to the Blacks in town. Meanwhile, while they may speak improperly based on what White America has been taught is proper English, the Black children in the story seem to be very bright, though far from formally educated. Also, both Black and White are poor here—an interesting similarity in a story where the characters seem to be focusing on difference.

Mel believes that the protagonists in the story are challenging standard stereotypes about Blacks and Whites because the White people are not very attractive, and the Black children seem very bright. Other students noted what they took to be indicators of poverty and lack of education. Theresa, another White student from the suburban campus, listed dirt roads, bare feet, and the use of nonstandard English.

We predicted that it took place in a poor town, since the kids were standing there barefoot and there were dirt roads. The language used in the story depicted the people were uneducated. The children didn't know the importance of Roosevelt. We realized the people were poor because none of them wore shoes. Also, when the children were inside the store they were amazed by the candy and the "shiny" items.

Marisol, a Black student from the urban campus, takes issue with the notions of class that are put forward by some of the White students. She writes,

Your response to this book caught my attention. You said the way the children spoke was an indication that they may not be educated. I disagree with that. Maybe these children didn't go to school. I haven't read the entire book yet. . . . Remember, this was the 1930's and they're from the South; maybe that's just their dialect. I'm sure the people in this story were probably poor, but wearing no shoes may also be another part of that culture. I was born and raised in Jamaica; my family wasn't considered to be poor, but I also walked without shoes. It was a part of my culture and it was done for comfort. I'm glad we're having these book discussions in order to help us understand that children speak with

different dialects and some of the things they do may be a part of their background culture.

Mary, a White student from the suburban campus, replied to Marisol's correction by indicating that her suburban group members only took into consideration the two factors such as the children's language and the children not wearing shoes. She concluded her posting by saying, "Through discussion we came to the conclusion that not only these children but the whole town was not well educated and poor."

Marisol responds,

Hi Mary. I wasn't implying that they were rich. I'm glad your group analyzed those particular elements in the book, but I responded under the assumption that you were viewing them as poor and uneducated based on their language and not wearing shoes. Again thanks for clarifying what you meant in your initial response to the book.

Mary replies, "Hi Marisol, no problem. You did make interesting points especially about the shoes." In this conversation, both Marisol and Mary put forth their own perceptions. Each wants her own knowledge validated. Marisol's knowledge is both academic and personal; she has gone barefoot in the dirt roads of Jamaica, and she has learned about the legitimacy of multiple dialects of English. Mary's knowledge of dialects is more academic: She is not sure she can agree that Marisol, a Black woman, has the authority to claim ownership of Black culture. Both of these students are able to back away from their tensions with one another, Marisol by thanking Mary for clarifying her response, and Mary by thanking Marisol for sharing interesting points about the shoes. Although the acknowledgments feel stilted, they may serve the purpose of keeping lines of communication open. However, as we shall find later in this article, Marisol's trust of the White students continues to be tested.

SEGREGATION AND PREJUDICE: LITTLE MAN

The nature of segregation is at the heart of this book. Theresa, a White student from the suburban campus, provides us with a

detailed description of how prejudice is played out in the conflict between Little Man and Dewberry, one of John Wallace's sons, who threatens to cut off Little Man's hands because they are "dirty."

Prejudice and segregation play a massive role in this story and we, the reader, get a good taste of what it must have been like to live in times like these. The four kids were asked to run an errand up at the White-owned general store and were treated very poorly by the owners. Little Man, who is 6 years old, was told by one of the store's workers, Dewberry, that his hands were dirty as dirt. But Little Man kept insisting to him that they were clean. Little Man took much offense to that comment and was beginning to understand that the color of his skin made a difference to the way that one is treated in their town.

In Theresa's version of the story, the full emotional impact is undervalued. Her remark can be contrasted with Sarah's, a Black student from the urban campus, who emphasizes how painful and humiliating this encounter was to Little Man. "In our group we discussed how traumatizing it was for a child to go to a store where they are not allowed, and all of a sudden Little Man is being told by an adult that he's dirty, and he is going to cut off his hands."

Several students debated the question of whether this incident was Little Man's first encounter with racism. His distress led them to think that Little Man had not experienced racism before the assault by Dewberry. Searching for a reasonable explanation in an unreasonable situation, Mary, a White student from the suburban campus, comments, "Little Man and Christopher-John did not really understand what Dewberry meant by dirty hands." Tara, another White student from the suburban campus, also argues this view, saying, "I don't think that Little Man understands the concept of racism yet, and so he was deeply offended and hurt by these comments." The comments of these teacher education students suggest a belief that prior knowledge of segregation would keep Little Man from being humiliated and frightened by Dewberry's harassment.

Here again, the comment that Little Man "was beginning to understand that the color of his skin makes a difference" needs to be placed in the broader context, that segregation pervaded the lives of African Americans, from cradle to grave. In this case, at

least one Black student, Marisol, shared a belief in the possibility of innocence, even in the Deep South of this era. She suggests, "Little Man is the youngest and he really doesn't understand much about hate."

"I'VE WALKED DOWN DIRT ROADS"

A central theme that arose from the data gathered in the second reader response group was the concerted attempt made by students from different sociocultural spaces to understand and respond to each other despite their different perspectives and situations, contexts that shaped their responses. Collaboration included challenging one another's assumptions and interpretations and elaborated the participants' clarification of ideas, within a framework of real communication. In one conversational set, students from both the urban and suburban campuses worked together to convince a suburban participant to change her mind about teaching the novella. This willingness to engage in substantive response contrasted with an earlier experience of intercollegiate WebCT discussions (Singer & Smith, 2003). However, the nature of situated response was highlighted by the way students from each group made sense of the historical context of the novella.

SITUATED RESPONSE

Discussants in the second reader response group developed their perceptions of the historical and political context of the novella based on the text, alternate readings and media, and their own experiences, mediated by the intergroup exchanges. For White suburban readers, superficial information could provide a context. For example, Kara, a White student from the suburban campus, wrote,

When I first came across the time and place of the story, it made me think about (the movie) *Mississippi Burning*. I do not remember the whole movie, but I know it had to do with slavery and segregation.

Whereas Kara connects to the general historical period by means of her prior knowledge, she conflated slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow in an amorphous and conceptually limited context.

Rochelle, another White student from the suburban campus, was able to use class readings to help her form an understanding of the setting. She referred to the Kohl (1996) article on Rosa Parks's involvement in the civil rights movement to relate to the fictional story:

I think it is very interesting that you could only call White people by their last name with a Mr., Mrs., or Ms. in front. Our teacher also handed out a reading on Rosa Parks. The author of this article points out what was true and what was not. . . . There is another point [Kohl] makes about readers and writers referring to Rosa Parks as Rosa. . . . The social practice in the South at this time was to call African-Americans by their first name as a way of reinforcing their inferior status.

The use of first and last names was a major issue in the novella, and Rochelle's response supports the use of intertextual resources such as nonfiction, news media, and historical fiction to enable students to make meaningful associations. Mia, a White student from the suburban campus, responded to Rochelle that she also was surprised by the "naming" issue and added, "It's amazing that we could learn something new from a children's book that we should have learned in a social studies or sociology class. I guess it could be controversial."

Mia voiced a complaint heard from elementary education students: a lack of historical information that incorporates varied perspectives. She also alludes to the fear that educators may entertain toward introducing negative aspects of U.S. history, a theme addressed in later conversations. Discussion group members from the urban campus also mentioned gaining new knowledge. In contrast to the White suburban members of her discussion group, Leah, a Black student from the urban campus, spoke of her new knowledge in the context of her background and skin color, rather than from nonfiction class readings:

I'm chocolate colored of West Indian heritage. In my class at (urban university) we were asked to look at the cover of the book first to discuss what we may think it means. My first reaction was the similarity of the southern houses to my village. I also relate to the bare feet because I used to do the same when I was a child. . . . However, in

the story *The Friendship* it is sad to read about how African Americans were treated by White people back then. I like the reading we're doing and the books I'm introduced to because I was not aware of several facts from Black history.

Several of the urban students in both subgroups brought greater "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 2001) to provide a framework for their personal understanding of the situation of African Americans in American history, whereas the White students in the second reader response group were more dependent on historical fiction and nonfiction in making meaning of the novel's themes. It is not surprising that African American and Caribbean American students from both campuses had a life-based understanding of racism and a wider understanding of class. White students tended to base their understanding on the text for support, rather than life experiences, although one White student expressed an understanding of racism using the analogy of her relatives' experiences during the European Holocaust. These differences continued to affect the responses of the urban and suburban discussants.

In a response that reflects the discussion of the first WebCT subgroup's experiences, Kara, a White student from the suburban campus, stimulated several concerned responses from group members in the urban setting when she characterized her own and her suburban classmates' understanding of the setting. These readers framed their response to the novella from their own experiences:

The description of the environment leads me to think that it is a poor neighborhood. In fact, one member of our group noticed the lack of shoes on the children's feet. We talked about the dialect in the text and the fact that everyone speaks alike. It is very different from what we are used to.

Urban group members, on the other hand, found that they could identify with the setting and disagreed with the White suburban members' perceptions. Ruth, a Black student from the urban school, commented, "In our group discussion, one of our members mentioned the fact that the cover reminded her of her childhood when she lived in Trinidad. In seeing the dirt road on the front cover, she was able to connect her memories to the book."

Lena, another Black urban student, added,

One way I could say that I can assimilate, when my family moved to the Dominican Republic when I was about 6 or 7 years old, I remember seeing many kids playing barefoot on the streets. It was something that was common to them even though I found it weird. . . . I got accustomed to that environment and then saw it as something normal.

Kara posted a somewhat distanced response, replying that she had never seen it that way before, as she had always lived in a suburban setting. No other suburban group member addressed this particular topic online again; however, another major issue in the discussions was the characters' use of vernacular and how teachers should address this issue. Ellen, an African American member of the suburban university, had been delayed in joining the online conversations due to computer problems. Halfway through the discussion experience, she joined the discourse, with an emotional statement that clearly emerges from her own experiences:

During my class group discussion, I discovered some interesting facts on what individuals learned about how African Americans spoke in the past. There is no such thing, as Black Talk and African Americans do not speak Ebonics. I am insulted, as an African American, to think some people believe Ebonics is a language spoken by African Americans. It is slang words used to make people laugh. . . . I do not like reading books that still refer to African Americans as niggers. A nigger is an ignorant FOOL that has no color. When I focused on the cover of the book, I already knew that I would not read it until I had to participate in a group discussion. I was born in the city, lived down south and walked on dirt roads. There is still a lot of prejudice in this world. In the past it was out in the open, today some people try and hide it, but it shows. I would never read this book to my class because it showed how people were prejudice [*sic*] and mean.

Rochelle, a White classmate from her book group, responded,

I understand how upset and angry subjects like this can make you. Whenever I watch films or read books about the Holocaust, I get very upset as well, because one reason I have very little family is due to that time. But one thing I do think is very important is for

children to know and understand those time periods. They need to know what awful things had occurred so they do not allow those sorts of things to ever happen again. It is very unfortunate that there is still a prejudice [*sic*] and racist attitude out there, but I think one way for people to change their minds or realize certain things is by educating them on the subject.

Lena, a Latina group member from the urban campus, immediately posted this reply:

I also agree with Rochelle in that it may be hard for you to accept what you are reading but it's something that needs to be discussed in class. I consider that by discussing it in class you will be able to teach to the kids how being prejudice [*sic*] and how discrimination has affected not only the African American population but other nationalities as well. This lesson could help kids learn that it's very cruel to discriminate others because of the color of their skin. . . . Through books like these we could teach the children that what's really important in a human being is the inside not the outside.

Rochelle reveals empathy with Ellen's position, using her own family's experiences of hatred and social and legal discrimination to connect to the anger and fear. Ana's experience as a Latina—from another culture—enables her to understand prejudice as well. These experiences caused them to implore Ellen to go beyond her own pain to educate others.

These conversations were illuminating for the White students in the suburban class, and the interchange above stimulated an intense conversation among all of the discussion groups in the language arts methods classroom. Ellen's strong feelings affected the other students' attitude toward teaching the novel in their own classes. Despite the engaged conversations on both sides, members of each group ultimately critiqued the other.

DISCUSSION: TEACHING THE BOOK TO CHILDREN

Both reader response groups argued about using the novel in classrooms. Ellen, the only Black student from the suburban campus, felt strongly that the ugly past should not be brought up in the

classroom, but in the previous segment of the discussion, her peers on both the urban and suburban campus disagree. In whole class discussions, other suburban class members argued along with Ellen that the topic may be too sensitive to teach to or read about in the elementary grades. In contrast, the majority of the urban students felt strongly that even young children can understand and learn from books like *The Friendship*.

Many students found the book to be powerful and a very good teaching tool, but they were not in agreement about which grades they thought should read the book. Marisol, a Black student from the urban campus, commented online that the different responses seem to reflect a division between the urban and the suburban teacher education students:

From what I've read, most of your class feels the book should be read in higher grades. In our discussions we felt the book could be used for the third grade and up. Think about it this way. Television exposes children to things worse than hate and segregation. Some children have adults in their lives who may be willing to discuss certain issues with them. . . . If we try to hide information that we feel is too difficult for children, they may learn it from someone who might make the situation worse.

In her written evaluation, Tina, a White student from the suburban campus, argued that teachers need to educate their students about why discrimination was and is wrong. She writes enthusiastically about using *The Friendship* to teach about discrimination:

Students must learn about racism in order to understand why it is unacceptable. "The Friendship" is a very powerful tool that can be used to get this message across to them. I believe students could walk away with a greater understanding of events that took place in our country at one time. Some people would disagree with introducing this book to an elementary class, but children need to be exposed to different cultures and ways of life and cannot be led to believe that there is and always was one way of life for everyone.

However, when facing thoughts of her own classroom, Tina's final word is, "I feel pretty certain that I would not incorporate this material for children in this age range." Mel, another White

student from the suburban campus, commented in his written evaluation, "After all the discussions in class, I still do not think I would use this book in my class."

Although the suburban students are moved by the story of *The Friendship*, the majority is not moved to take action and incorporate the book into elementary classroom curriculum. Their lack of historical information, their fear of talking about race, and the opinions of an eloquent Black classmate may have affected this decision. The urban students, however, express appreciation of how this book inspires them to take action. Belinda, an urban student, emphasizes, "If teachers neglect opportunities like these to introduce such readings to children, how can children deal with these acts of meanness in an intelligent way?"

Rachel, also from the urban campus, brings the discussion to a more challenging level. She talks about the obligation of adults to help children envision a better world.

We have yet to overcome racism in our society. If adults don't start to be mature, responsible, resourceful and informed individuals, how will they help their children to overcome all of these rotten things in this world and still stand strong? We have a tough road ahead of us. That is why we, as teachers in classrooms, should help children sort out these issues.

An urban student, Marisol, had another disagreement with the suburban, White students, which she did not choose to put into the relatively public space of the WebCT but incorporated into her final essay about the entire intercollegiate reader response experience. She says,

This book has affected my ideas about race. Through the reader response groups and the WebCT, I realize that we as adults still "hold back" on the race issue. I didn't question the suburban student about her reasons for assuming Jeremy (a minor White character) was an important character. I didn't want her to feel I was attacking her. I assumed she was a White student who felt the little White boy would save the day. Most of the books and movies I was exposed to as a child had White heroes saving the Black person. I realized I was judging her reasons on the basis of her race. As teachers we need to assess our own views about race.

CONCLUSION

A thread that runs through this study is the difference between academic and personal knowledge. The White students who participated in these intercollegiate reader response groups often had academic knowledge about the issues raised in *The Friendship*, but they frequently lacked personal knowledge. A major concern for teacher education students is whether this gap can be bridged. We believe there is some room for optimism, when we look at how the comments of White students from the suburban campus evolved during the course of conversations with Black students from the urban campus. Mel, for example, takes on a more serious tone about respect after he finishes reading the book. It is important to emphasize that this transformation took place in the context of an interracial setting. It is unlikely that such change would have taken place otherwise. Neither group was uniform in its responses, but they did provide arenas in which issues of race and class could be discussed openly.

Through these intersecting conversations, group members, speaking from their cultural and social positions as White, Latina, and Black, middle class suburban, urban working class, and middle class, supported one another's strong beliefs and emotions, shared information, and interrogated each other's interpretations in a supportive and heuristic manner. They also began to empathize with others. Goals of the study included helping White students from the suburban campus recognize the limitations of their cultural stance and for both groups of students to go beyond personal knowledge so that reading and discussion would lead to critical reflection. In looking at data from both reader response groups, we found that initial denials of racial difference did occur among the White students from the suburban campus. This confirms research that indicates a strong tendency among White in-service teachers to focus on the universal commonalities of experiences rather than recognizing exclusion or institutional prejudice.

Referring to the fear of including controversial topics by teachers of younger children, Jonathan Silin (1997) wrote, "I am repeatedly told that it is the children who are not ready for these

difficult topics. What can they understand of such complex and disturbing phenomena? I am left to reflect on whose readiness is really in question" (p. 83). Our study of these intercollegiate reader response groups supports this insight.

Finally, our study confirms both the positive and the negative aspects of previous online discussion group research. According to Mabrito (1991), online communication is characterized by a "psychological distance" that "produce[s] a less threatening environment than face-to-face interaction" (p. 510). However, Karchmer's (2001) study of 13 teachers found that e-mail-type correspondence eliminated the richness of face-to-face discussions. Our study demonstrates a high degree of involvement on the part of participants that contributed to a sense of shared community and encouraged equitable participation. We believe that our use of the WebCT, combined with a provocative and historically situated example of children's literature, provided our teacher education students with the ability to discuss their knowledge of history and their understanding of racism in ways that are not typical in our racially segregated society in general.

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