Unexpected Convergences

A Dialogue across Differences

John Ambrosio & Gilbert C. Park

Over the past two years, we have been meeting regularly to discuss issues and challenges related to multicultural education. The majority of our students are from small, rural, mostly White, working and middle class communities located within a 150 mile radius of the Midwestern campus where we teach.

In this dialogue, we discuss how we became involved in teaching multicultural education, describe transformative experiences that shaped our lives and thinking, and examine some of the key conceptual and pedagogical issues related to the practice of multicultural education. By providing a window into our own experience and thinking, we seek to problematize and inform the work of multicultural educators.

Coming to the Field of Multicultural Education

Gilbert: Let's start by sharing how you became interested in teaching multicultural education.

John: I came to multicultural education through critical pedagogy. I mean that's where I started, with Paulo Freire. I began studying multicultural education because of its similarities to critical pedagogy. There's a lot of overlap between the two, but there are some important differences, too. Critical pedagogy is more concerned with issues of power as opposed to cultural difference or diversity. Although there are different conceptions of multicultural education, some versions shared many of the same concerns with issues of equity and social justice.

In a prior incarnation, when I was a doctoral student in sociology, I took the first course on Antonio Gramsci given in the U.S., taught by Perry Anderson at the New School for Social Research. I was fascinated and very excited by Gramsci's writings on education, by his conception of the role of education in social transformation. This was the beginning of my interest in theorizing education.

Gramsci always thought strategically, and his theory of education was part of an overall strategy for revolutionary social change. My interest in education first emerged with Gramsci's theory of education. Then I discovered the work of Paulo Freire. Multicultural education provided continuity with my earlier interest in Gramsci and Freire. The more transformative and anti-racist versions of multicultural education were consistent with my long-standing commitment to education for social justice.

Too often, multicultural education is about cultural understanding, diversity, and tolerance, but that's not really what interested me. I wanted to examine the relation between socially constructed differences and issues of power. For me, the purpose of multicultural education isn't simply to facilitate cultural acceptance and understanding—although that's certainly necessary.

In previous discussions, you mentioned that Gloria Ladson-Billings had an important effect on your thinking. How did she influence your interest in becoming a multicultural educator?

Gilbert: Her class on culturally relevant pedagogy showed me the possibilities of multicultural education. I was frustrated with the diversity courses I took as an undergraduate that focused on improving human relationships. I felt that it was such a deception and disservice to poor students and students of color. I grew up as a person of color in an inner city with first hand experience in the discrepancy between images of the U.S. as a racially harmonious society, as "a nation of immigrants," promoted by conservative scholars like Diane Ravitch (1990), and the racial tension in my immediate surroundings. I saw the need to challenge this false image of U.S. society. I wanted schools to be honest to poor students and students of color about the harsh social and economic realities, and about how this affects their pursuit of happiness in school and in the wider world.

So, I walked into the classroom with the attitude: What's the point of all this holding hands and doing Kumbaya? My limited understanding of multicultural education was challenged as we read and discussed the works of multicultural educators like Carl Grant, Christine Sleeter, Geneva Gay, James Banks, and Lisa Delpit, to name a few. Gloria's course taught me that an important aspect of multicultural education is to equip students with the tools to succeed academically and to think critically as citizens in a democratic society.

I also learned that it's important to create a safe learning environment where everyone feels that they can contribute. Gloria wasn't as forceful about her politics as she was about legitimating different life experiences and opinions that made us who we are. At the same time, she made us think and ask: Why are you doing this?, as a way of critically evaluating our own stance and how it affects our understanding of students of diverse backgrounds.

What I got from her was the view that there are other ways to look at things that are just as important. By validating different perspectives, she helped me conceptualize my own view of multicultural education. I think about her teaching a lot. She forced me to come to an understanding of what multicultural education is for me, and that's what I'm trying to do for my own students.

For me, multicultural education is a pedagogy that's culturally relevant, that emphasizes educational equity and academic success, and that challenges

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students to think critically about the world and their place in it.

John: In a sense, then, you're trying to replicate the experience you had in Gloria's class. I think all good teachers draw on each other's work. That's one of the things I learned early on: You don't have to reinvent the wheel all the time. When you come across effective pedagogical practices, you shouldn't hesitate to incorporate them into your own repertoire. At the same time, you cannot reduce teaching to methodology. It's really a craft, an ongoing apprenticeship in which we learn from each other.

Gilbert: Yes. It's important that we engage in conversations with our students and other teachers in the field to foster a sense of collegiality and collaboration. Instead of promoting the idea that there is one best way to teach, we should be able to teach the way we see fit, in conversation with other teachers.

Education for Empowerment

Gilbert: How do you understand the concept of empowerment?

John: Students are empowered when they become informed, self-reflective, and critical thinkers. You don't empower students by filling their heads with someone else's meanings or interpretations. It's important that we recognize and affirm the voices of our students, and value their contributions. At the same time, we have to continually challenge students to examine the assumptions and preconceptions that inform their interpretations.

For me, empowerment means equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable them to think critically about the world they inhabit and their place in it, to consider social realities beyond their own experience, and to act effectively in creating a more just society.

Gilbert: It sounds like transformation is an important aspect of multicultural education for you.

John: For me, multicultural education is about developing certain dispositions, or what Deborah Meier, in her book *The Power of Their Ideas*, calls habits of mind, that enable people to function intelligently and effectively in the world.

Gilbert: I agree with you that it's important for people to understand who they are and how they fit into the world, so they can find ways to serve their own interests. We want students to ask questions like: Who benefits from this? As they begin to understand how they fit into the world, and to recognize the limits and possibilities of their profession, I want to equip them with the tools to make changes.

What I have students do is define reality in their own words. I think naming reality for themselves is empowering. I grew up wanting to be a truck driver but I was told that it's a White man's job. There was a point in my life when I started to ask myself: Why is it a White man's job? Why did I accept what others told me?

I began to develop a consciousness about my relationships with others, and about how they described the way the world is, and how it should be. I felt empowered when I began to ask: What is it like being an Asian American man in this society?

Personal Journeys toward Empowerment

John: What was the catalyst that made you think about your place in the world?

Gilbert: For me, the catalyst was the Los Angeles riot or civil protest in 1992, the events that took place following the beating of Rodney King. I come from a very close-knit Korean community in Chicago where most of the people are employed in small Korean-owned businesses such as flea markets, laundries, and shoe stores. The businesses are located in economically impoverished neighborhoods, and cater mostly to African Americans and Latinos. Many of them were taken over by Koreans when Jewish shop owners left the area after the civil rights protests of the 1960s.

In protesting against racial injustices, some people showed their anger and frustration through violence against Korean shop owners, who were caught in the middle. The media portrayed the event as a Black and Korean thing, when the real issue was larger social injustices. It made me think about how the media had the power to portray reality, and how this version of reality was embraced by Koreans and by people in general.

It wasn't just a Korean and Black issue, although there were some misconceptions and friction between the two communities. It was a wake up call for me and many other young Korean Americans, who started to question our place in the larger society, which was illustrated in Pyong Gap Min's (1996) study of Korean shop owners in New York City.

As all this was happening, I was introduced to some readings about power issues, about who has the power to name reality. I was beginning to look at race issues as more than just interracial conflicts on an individual basis, but about the dominant group's power to reduce the range of humanity for others. Around this time, I sought out works on Asian American experiences as a way to better understand myself, to empower myself to name my own realities.

One of the books, *Unraveling the Model Minority Stereotype* by Stacey Lee, talked about the experiences of Asian Americans in schools. Reading her book was a catalyzing experience that inspired me to pursue this line of research. As I became more educated about Asian American history and the school experiences of Asian American students, I saw some similar struggles we had as a racial group. I began to see myself more as an Asian American, instead of just Korean, which is consistent with Espiritu's (1992) study of Asian American pan-ethnic identity development as a political choice. I saw that I shared a common set of experiences as an American of Asian heritage, an identity that could be translated into political power. I found my own community, and a perspective, a lens, to examine the world around me.

Lee's view, that there's no point in conducting academic studies if there are no practical implications, was very powerful for me. That's how I was led toward the field of education. I wanted to challenge students to think about why they do the things they do, and who benefits the most. Multicultural education gives Asian American students some much needed and deserved attention that the model minority stereotype often prevents them from receiving. So, my interest in multicultural education is also practical: it's a way to better serve the population that I'm most interested in—recent Asian immigrants who are becoming Asian Americans.

John: You experienced a sense of empowerment in naming your own reality, in not accepting other people's perception of you, your community, and your academic potential. I know that you've written about the model minority stereotype, and how it places Asian American students who need academic support at a disadvantage. Equipping students to name their own reality, and to name their own needs and

the needs of their community, is essential to empowerment.

Gilbert: When did you first experience a sense of empowerment?

John: My own transformation happened, quite unexpectedly, when I was in college. I grew up in a working class Italian American family. My father was a butcher in a local supermarket and my mother worked as a secretary during the school year. Both of my parents are first generation Italian Americans. Our social life revolved mostly around extended family gatherings and religious events. My parents rarely socialized with people outside of their social class, and they were shunned by some of the adults in our neighborhood because of their ethnicity.

Because I grew up in a suburban community in central New Jersey, I was very isolated in terms of my exposure to racial and cultural difference. Except for a small number of African American families, who lived in a cluster of tiny wooden houses at the end of a long dirt road, there was little diversity. The town was almost completely White, and mostly middle class in terms of income. Even thought I grew up in a middle class suburb, our family culture was working class, and a stone's throw from the hilltop village in Italy that my paternal grandparents came from.

Although I had a strong sense of my ethnic identity, I grew up feeling deeply alienated, but I didn't know why. During my first year in college I took a political science course. A friend of mine took the class and recommended it to me. At the time, I was a business finance major, and wanted to become a stock broker. I was bored with the subject matter, but didn't know what else to do.

As I said, on the recommendation of a friend I took an introductory course in political science. We read a number of books from different analytical perspectives. One of the books, *Democracy for the Few* by Michael Parenti, was a Marxist-influenced analysis of the relation between American politics and capitalism. Reading that book absolutely transformed my view of the world.

You know, you grow up thinking the world is the way it is because it's always been that way. Your view of reality, your whole world, becomes naturalized. So, I never thought that life could be any different, that it should be any different, or why things are the way they are. I didn't really think about it. I was never challenged to think that way before.

Reading *Democracy for the Few* totally blew my mind. It completely changed my perception of social reality. Parenti's book gave me the language and concepts I needed to name my own reality, to think about my own experience in new ways. I finally had a way of understanding the social world, and my place in it, that made sense to me. Reading that book was a transformational experience in my life. After I took that course, I changed my major to political science, and never looked back.

Because I come from a working class family, my consciousness was shaped by the realities of the world I lived in. Parenti's book gave me a way of understanding why I was so alienated from myself, from others, and from society. It gave me a compelling way of understanding my own reality, of what it means to be a working class person in late capitalist American society.

As I began to understand myself in new ways, my world was fundamentally transformed. I wound up writing my senior thesis on Marx's concept of alienation. I focused on alienation because that's what I needed to know about. I needed to know what was at the root of this feeling I had for most of my life. So I wound up studying Marx, Engels, and Lenin in college, and continued building my theoretical and conceptual knowledge. Like your experience with Stacey Lee, Parenti's book equipped me to name my own reality, which transformed my life.

I think we're both trying to equip our students with the analytical tools and dispositions that can open up their world to new and unimagined possibilities, that will lead them to question the way things are, and not just accept it. That's why Freire is so important to my own thinking. It's about opening up new possibilities, new ways of thinking, being, and doing. Once you understand that social reality is constructed, that it's a human invention, it opens up new possibilities. We don't have to do it this way—we can do things differently.

That understanding was enormously liberating for me. We don't have to accept the way others name reality. We don't have to accept other people's meanings and truths. As multicultural educators, we encourage students to name their own reality in order to remake the world.

Empowerment through Multicultural Education

Gilbert: It sounds like there are many things we share. We were both "othered" in different ways, and experienced a personal transformation while we were in college. How do you think this plays out for college students who may not have had the experience of being "othered," or who are unlikely to have this experience? How do we challenge these students to see beyond their own experience?

John: That's a very good question. For me, the purpose of education is transformation. But we can only invite students to think critically, to seek new possibilities. We can only invite students to consider others perspectives, other ways of thinking. We can equip them with language, concepts, and theories, but ultimately they must want to move in that direction.

I don't judge students on the degree to which their thinking mirrors my own, but on their willingness to consider other people's realities. As I said, students don't have to move in a certain direction, but I want them to consider the possibility that what they think they already know is not the whole story. It's a balancing act, because we want students to develop the habit of mind of being both skeptical of other people's truths, while being open to hearing and seriously considering them.

Gilbert: It's important that students make an argument instead of simply regurgitate what they've heard. To me, making an intelligent and well supported argument is an important step in developing critical thinking skills. But it's not enough, because there are racist students out there who are critical thinkers.

John: As you say, we want students to think critically, but toward what end? Multicultural education should oppose market values that produce poverty and inequality, and replace them with communal values of equity, justice, and social solidarity. For me the question is: How do we encourage students to use their critical thinking skills to work toward a more just world? Students can either accept or reject this invitation, but I believe it's our responsibility to put this ethical choice before them.

I tell my students that I don't expect them to agree with me. Like you, I want students to develop their own understandings, but I want them to do so in a well-reasoned and coherent way, based on some kind of evidence, and not solely on their personal experience. I want students to be able to deliberate with others who have different views, in an intelligent and thoughtful way.

Of course, there's information I want

students to know, but I also want them to develop a certain disposition toward knowledge, a healthy skepticism regarding the arguments and claims of others. Most of all, that's what I'm trying to teach, along with a willingness to listen to other people on their own terms. I want students to learn how to listen, no just to hear, as Lisa Delpit discusses in her book *Other People's Children*.

The point is to open up different ways of thinking, being, and doing. Because I'm a White working class heterosexual man, I've had a very narrow set of life experiences. I tell my students that I need other people's understanding of their own experience to help me better understand myself, and my place in the world. I can't do it on my own. We need each other to obtain a more complex and complete understanding of social reality.

I tell them that I cannot understand how power operates in society, how it advantages some and disadvantages others, without taking into account the experiences of people of color, of low-income people, of women, of gay and lesbian people, and of people who are disabled. We cannot address issues of individual and institutional racism unless we are willing to accept the reality of other people's lived experiences, of their daily struggles.

Creating Learning Communities

Gilbert: To me, it's similar to teachers wanting to be color-blind, which is not only impossible, but only benefits those who can afford to be blind to color. While some of us can choose to look beyond color, there are those of us who do not have the option to look past color because of how it shapes every aspect of our lives, as Mary Waters (1996) discusses in her study of Caribbean immigrants.

The color-blind approach helps to legitimize the experiences of Western European Americans as normal, against which non-Whites are measured. I go back to the famous "I have a dream" speech, where Dr. King imagines a society in which children are not judged by their color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I don't think we're quite there yet, and pretending that we are is just being dishonest.

John: Yes. That goes back to the point we were discussing before. If you have always been a part of the norm, it's easy to blind yourself to the realities of others. As multicultural teachers, we struggle with the issue of how to encourage students to reconsider what they think they already know about race, social class, ethnicity, etc. Their deep psychological investment in the meritocracy, for instance, is a major obstacle to helping students think critically about the world.

The meritocracy tells them that if you work hard and play by the rules, you will succeed. We can provide students with all kinds of counter-examples that illustrate why this claim is false, but the question is: How do we get students to consider an alternative viewpoint?

Gilbert: I think it's very important to have a rapport with students, so they will not see me as someone who will criticize or crucify them. I want them to see me as someone who will support them, which is easier said than done. I have an assignment in which I ask students to write their reflections on the readings. In my written response, I try to point out what I feel are the strengths, together with the weaknesses, and try to make sure that differences in our opinions are not reflected in the weaknesses.

I try to be transparent with students in my assessment of their work, while encouraging them to pursue excellence. It's very time consuming, but I'm trying to engage students in a conversation with me and with the readings.

John: We have a similar approach. I try to build a rapport with students by sharing personal experiences in class so they can see that I'm a human being, too, and that I don't have all the answers. I also have a dialogue, a kind of personal conversation, with each of my students in my responses to their written work. Students are surprised that I spend so much time and effort responding to their papers. I overheard a few students talking in class one day about a paper they got just back from another professor: they were complaining that the professor didn't even bother to read their work!

As you say, it takes an enormous amount of time to provide detailed feedback, but I think the effort is well worth it. Students know that you took the time to read their work carefully, and to respond in a thoughtful and constructive way. It gives students a sense of their importance, and it's a sign of how much you respect and value their work.

Some students reveal things to me in papers they don't share in class. Students will share important information about themselves when they trust that you'll respond generously and without being judgmental. I think the bottom line is that students need to trust you with their identity and self-esteem before you can have the kind of conversations that are essential to multicultural education. They need to know that you value them, and that you're going to be considerate with their thoughts and feelings.

I also think a certain amount of kindness and generosity is needed. I can be very academically demanding of students, but I also try to be generous with them. I push them. I want students to think deeply about the subject matter, so I challenge their thinking. In class, I typically respond by affirming their thoughts and experiences, by finding some common ground—if possible—and then follow up with a question aimed at unpacking the statement without being confrontational.

I try to get students to recognize what they just said, to make visible the underlying assumptions and preconceptions that make their statement possible. I also pose "what if?" kinds of questions that compel students to think outside of the norm, that challenge what they assume to be self-evident truths about people and society.

It takes a while to build the necessary trust with students. Initially, they're not comfortable with sharing their opinions in class. It's like they're always waiting for someone to chop their heads off. After students realize that I'm not wielding an axe, they slowly begin to open up.

It's absolutely critical that we create a non-judgmental atmosphere in the classroom, that we accept where students are at, rather then where we would like them to be. Students will sometimes say outrageous or ignorant things, but rather than blame the messenger, I use these opportunities as teachable moments to address issues that might not otherwise become a topic of conversation.

Gilbert: Maybe in the past they were evaluated on how much they regurgitated instead of being assessed on how much they grew. I agree that building a sense of trust among students, as well with the instructor, is an important aspect of multicultural education. In my classes I divide students into small groups early in the semester. In these groups, they do assignments together, study for exams, and discuss daily topics of the class.

What I'm trying to do is encourage students to access their social capital, to see each other as a resource, and to share

their ideas. As we share ideas and build trust, we enrich our teaching and deepen our commitment to the field. I'm trying to foster a sense of solidarity in students, so they see each other as allies in schools.

John: I think it's important to create a supportive learning community. At the beginning of each semester I have students share personal stories, through poetry and other activities, to begin the process of breaking down some of the unconscious preconceptions and assumptions we all have about each other. Students need to know that you're not going to devalue, dismiss, or humiliate them. It's also important that we establish and enforce ground rules for respectful dialogue. You can't have a successful class, especially one that relies heavily on dialogue, without creating a supportive and non-judgmental learning environment.

Multicultural Education and Social Justice

John: Many of my White students think that multicultural education is about other people, or that it only pertains to ethnically diverse classrooms.

Gilbert: I hear that a lot, too. Early in the semester some students wonder how they're going to use multicultural education in their mostly White classrooms. I challenge them to see how the issue of power plays out in schools along the lines of different social markers such as class, race, gender, religion, sexuality, and others. I respond to their concerns by saying that as they understand themselves better, in terms of their location in the system of power relations, they may find a more effective way to serve their students, who are not going to be demographically homogenous or have the same needs.

John: As you say, multicultural education is concerned with how the particular combination of social markers advantage or disadvantage students. Even if you have a school full of White kids, they are not the same kids in terms of social class, religious affiliation, or ethnic identity. Even if our students were all the same, they will be living in an increasingly diverse world with people different from themselves.

Gilbert: To examine the intersection of race, gender, and social class, I have students read an article by Lois Weis, "White Male Working-Class Youth: An Exploration of Relative Privilege and Loss," about a group of working class White boys who must alter their sense of manhood—which is based on treating girls as their personal property—when faced with a declining economic situation that prevents them from equating their worthiness with being the provider. The article explores how economic dislocation had a negative effect on their interactions with African American boys.

For me, the analysis of power is always about how various issues come together in a specific context, such as schools. Talking about the intersection of these social markers is a useful tool in challenging the view that multicultural education is only about people who are different. It's also about us. Multicultural education is about more than eating Taco Bell to celebrate cultural difference.

As I mentioned, I have students come up with their own definition of multicultural education. I discuss Christine Sleeter's (1996) view of multicultural education as a political quest for social justice, and then use Ladson-Billings' (1995) definition of culturally relevant pedagogy to explain my own view of multicultural education. I want students to think about what multicultural education means to them, because when they begin teaching they'll encounter different versions of multicultural education. I want students to think critically about how they're going to teach from a multicultural perspective. I want them to have a clear idea about what they want to do, how they want to do it, and why it's important.

We also examine the connection between multicultural education and equal educational opportunity. I assign readings with conflicting points of view that focus on various issues. More often than not, students recognize their own struggles in school related to these issues. But I found that it's difficult for many students to step out of the box, to see that their struggle might not be the same as that of other people. That's the biggest challenge I face. Many of my White students, who are either first generation college students or have led a comfortable middle class life, have a hard time understanding the lives of others and their struggles in school.

John: That's an important topic, and it gets back to the myth of the meritocracy. In my classes, I talk about equality of opportunity versus equality of condition: the issue is where you start from in relation to others, not whether or not you're allowed to run the race. I think it's very important because we're trying get students to think about the false promises of the meritocracy, the belief that the absence of legal barriers to social advancement is sufficient to guarantee fairness, equity, and social justice.

From this perspective, students conclude that since we don't have Jim Crow any longer, then we must have equal opportunity for people of color. I think we need to equip students to challenge such myths, those official truths that keep them from acknowledging other people's realities, and from becoming allies in the struggle for social and economic justice.

Critical Pedagogical Transformations
Texts and Authors Mentioned by John and Gilbert

Texts	Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children* Stacey Lee, *Unraveling the Model Minority Stereotype* Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas* Michael Parenti, *Democracy for the Few* Lois Weis, "White Male Working-Class Youth: An Exploration of Relative Privilege and Loss"	
Other Authors	James A. Banks Paulo Freire Geneva Gay Antonio Gramsci Carl Grant	Gloria Ladson-Billings Pyong Gap Min Diane Ravitch Christine Sleeter Mary Waters

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the Creative Writing Section of *Multicultural Education* Magazine

We're seeking submissions of creative writing on topics including diversity, multiculturalism, equity, education, social justice, environmental justice, and more specific subtopics (race, gender/sex, sexual orientation, language, (dis)ability, etc.). Do you write poetry? Short stories or flash fiction? Creative nonfiction? We will consider any style or form, but we prefer prose that is no longer than 750 words and poetry that can fit comfortably onto a single page of text.

Submissions will be reviewed on a rolling basis

And... If you're a teacher, Pre-K through lifelong learning, please encourage your students to submit to us! We would love submissions from the youngsters as well as the not-so-youngsters!

Where to Submit: Submissions may be sent electronically or by postal mail. Electronic submissions should be sent to Paul C. Gorski at pgorski1@gmu.edu with the subject line "ME Submission." Hard copy, mailed submissions should be addressed to: Paul C. Gorski, Integrative Studies, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030.

Format: All submissions should be double-spaced, including references and any other materials. Please send one copy of your submission with the title noted at the top of the page. The title of the manuscript, name(s) of author(s), academic title(s), institutional affiliation(s), and address, telephone number, and e-mail address of the author(s) should all be included on a cover sheet separate from the manuscript. If you are a student or if you are submitting work on behalf of a student, please include age, grade level, and school name.

What to Send: If you are submitting your work via postal mail, we ask that authors send the full text of the submission on a 3-and-one-half-inch High Density PC-compatible computer disk in any common word-processing program. If you wish the manuscript or other materials to be returned after consideration and publication, please also send a stamped and addressed return envelope large enough for that purpose.

Please address questions to Paul C. Gorski at pgorski1@gmu.edu