Talk among student teachers in an urban high school: Questioning dimensions of difference

Michelle Yvonne Szpara
Long Island University

Race and other forms of difference are socially constructed concepts, continually reproduced and redefined in interaction. It is important to focus on how race and class are constructed by future teachers, because the ways in which they perceive their students may affect their interactions in the classroom, including having lower expectations for certain minority groups. This study focuses on how a cohort of interns – predominantly White (European American) and middle-class – make sense of racial and class differences while teaching in an urban, low-income, minority-race high school. Ethnographically oriented discourse analysis was employed to examine the interns' representations of difference. Findings include the rarity of explicit discourse about race and class, the functions of various discourse strategies to circumvent explicit discussions, and a deficit model approach among interns toward educating low income, minority students.

> *"Teaching and student teaching are recognized as fundamentally political activities in which every teacher plays a part by design or by default."*
> *(Teacher Education Program Handbook)*

Inequities based on race and socioeconomic status pose a serious problem in the US public schools. According to Kozol (1991), it is predominantly students of color and poor students who do not have access to high quality, public education. He further described public schools as reproducing the current racial and socioeconomic stratifications seen in society. Beane and Apple (1995) espoused a different view of the public educational system as a means for change away from the current structure of White, middle-class privilege.

Schools serve as a major institution for the socialization of youth. As authorities in the classroom, teachers may unwittingly privilege White, middle-class norms for conversational interaction and non-verbal behavior (Ferguson, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Students who talk and behave according to majority norms are praised as good students. Those who talk or act differently may be identified as rude, disrespectful, or disruptive. Schools can function to reproduce current race and class stratifications in society by giving preference to the current dominant norms for interpretation and interaction.

On the other hand, schools and teachers can help to re-center current norms to include other racial, cultural, and economic groups. One way to accomplish this is to teach minority or lower-income students

about the "culture of power" (Delpit 1995) – the rules for conduct in social situations, dictated by those in power. With a teacher's guidance, students can find a balance between honoring their culture and becoming versed in the culture of the White, middle-class community, including the use of standard (White) English.

The Teacher Education Program in this study strongly espoused the view of teachers and schools as agents of change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993). The interns in the program, all pre-service teacher candidates, were expected to critically reflect through conversational interaction upon current problems in American society, propose remedies, and make a difference in their field placements (Acosta-Deprez, 1995; Davis, 1995; Khera, 1995). As more programs attempt to incorporate diversity education into their curricula, both students and faculty struggle with varying degrees of success in holding critical, reflective discussions on socially taboo topics (Bruna, 1999; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993; Ravitch, 1999).

This study involved a rigorous examination of the conversations of a cohort of 44 interns in a one-year, Masters-level, urban teacher education program. The research focused on the ways in which this cohort utilized conversational interaction to make sense of their teaching experiences in an urban high school serving low income, minority students. The majority of interns were White (European American) and middle-class.

Scholars have come to understand race and other forms of difference as socially constructed concepts, which are continually reproduced and redefined in interaction (Omi & Winant, 1986). According to Lave and Wenger (1991/1996), the world is socially constituted, and learning and knowing arise in relation among people engaged in activity. In the present study, this referred to interns engaging in conversational interaction about issues of race and class in their schools. The interns "formulate(d) linguistic representations of their understanding(s)" of the issues they encountered daily in their field experiences and offered them as contributions to the discussion of the cohort (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992). The cohort members then responded verbally or non-verbally, providing feedback to the original speaker, as well as input for the other listeners. In this way, the speakers' and hearers' linguistic representations of issues related to race and class might be modified through interaction.

Researchers in many fields have postulated that the construction of knowledge within a community of learners via oral communication can greatly facilitate intrapersonal and interpersonal growth and learning (Henson, 1993; Knights, 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991/1996; Rogoff & Gardner, 1984; Shor, 1980; Vygotsky, 1962/1969). Following this theory, the teacher education program in this study sought to address

issues of urban education through the formation of a "community" of interns and supervisors who met to talk about how best to teach the high school students. The following excerpt is taken from the program's Teacher Education Handbook:

"With cooperating teacher(s) and Teacher Education faculty, interns participate in group seminars that become intellectual communities wherein they can discuss and critique current theory and research, reflect on their own practices in light of these, and share and revise, through writing and talking, their ideas about teaching and learning."

The present research examined how the interns utilized conversation to make sense of the differences they encountered in their student teaching experiences. The research questions were as follows:

1) What was the nature of the talk among the interns in an urban teacher education program?

2) How did the interns use conversational interaction to make sense of the racial and class differences encountered while teaching in an urban high school?

Ethnographically oriented discourse analysis, or interactional sociolinguistics, was used to examine the representations held by interns regarding the dimensions of difference they encountered. This method involved the context-sensitive microanalysis of language in interaction (Tannen 1993). Attention was given to the examination of speech situations (Hymes, 1972, 1974), interactional sociolinguistics (Goffman, 1981; Gumperz, 1982), social rules governing speech communities (Wolfson, 1989), politeness strategies and face-saving (Brown & Levinson, 1978/1987; Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992), and the form-function relationships of laughter, back-channeling, and silence (Schiffrin, 1994). The texts were taken from audio-taped transcripts of the interns' weekly meetings with supervisors and semi-structured interviews conducted over the course of the program. Entry- and exit-interviews were conducted with a representative subset of ten interns. Initial interviews focused on philosophy of teaching, expectations for the program, and experiences with people who were different from them. Exit interviews asked interns to compare their initial philosophy and expectations versus their current views. The exit interviews were also used to share initial findings and request feedback.

Ethnographic understandings of the contexts for interaction were drawn from field notes recorded in interns' university classes, interns' own classrooms at the high school, and other places where the interns met to talk. The researcher was initially introduced as a currently certified high school teacher, conducting research on urban teacher education programs. As a White, middle-class female of similar age, the researcher blended well with the community of interns. The researcher was never in

the role of instructor or evaluator, and instead sat alongside interns in their classes.

The Teacher Education Program

The Teacher Education Program (TEP) was based in a large university in a major metropolitan area. According to the program literature, interns were expected to examine the political, social, and economic forces which shape US education, particularly the factory model of education, schools as reproducers of the social order, and the place of race, class, and gender as important social constructs. These goals became important in the analysis, because examples of interns examining constructs of race and class were not as prevalent as expected.

Of the forty-four interns in TEP, approximately 60% were female, and almost 25% were students of color (African American, Asian American, Latino, or biracial). I studied the whole cohort of 44 interns and focused in-depth on a representative subset of ten interns placed at Coventry High School (CHS). CHS was a comprehensive public school, serving close to 1800 students. Its student population was 90% African American and 99.5% minority in terms of race or ethnicity. Since an overwhelming majority of its students were eligible to receive free or reduced lunches, the school made meals available to all students at no cost.

Results

Data was drawn from ethnographic observations of the whole cohort of 44 interns and from audio-taped transcripts of weekly meetings and interviews with the subset of ten interns at CHS. Data from the transcripts and the field notes were initially analyzed separately. When both sources showed similar trends, the final analysis combined the data points. Across a year of observations and audio-taping, I found very little explicit talk among the interns in the program. During 200+ hours of data collection, approximately 80 explicit comments were recorded. From the data, the following definitions were operationalized:

• *Explicit references* in discourse were those which named or described the race or class of a particular person or group of persons using unambiguous terms such as "Black," "White," or "middle class."

− "As a White woman, I will never truly understand what it means to be Black in this society."

• *Implicit or indirect references* in discourse were those which referred to a person or group of persons and could be traced through a series of assumptions back to a particular racial or class-delimited group. Examples include "urban learner" and "ghetto school."

−   "I let her sleep in class because sometimes her little girl keeps her up all night." (A White intern described a Black, single mother in her classroom.)

•   *Extra-linguistic references* referred to discourse which only made sense when paired with visually explicit information, such as the skin color of the speaker or the skin color of other individuals in the immediate physical setting.

−   "Women clutch their handbags when they see me walking towards them on the sidewalk." (The speaker is a Black male.)

These definitions should not be considered distinct categories; rather they provided a framework for analyzing the data. They can be considered as signposts along a continuum of explicitness in talking about race and class.

Since the original goal of the research had been to examine the explicit talk found within the program, the next stages of analysis focused on the nature of the discourse. Specifically, I sought to understand where the explicit discourse did and did not exist, and to explore possible explanations for the paucity of explicit discourse in a program that espoused open examination of the challenges involved in educating students in an under-resourced district.

Major Assertions for Explicit References to Race and Class

First, majority and minority-race interns initiated explicit race- or class-related comments in similar proportions (see Table 1). In this table, both race and gender were evaluated to determine if any patterns were observable in terms of who initiated explicit comments. In Rows 2 (% of interns in TEP program) and 3 (% of explicit comments made), the percentages are closely aligned. Although there was no observable pattern in looking solely at race or gender, patterns were observable in terms of who spoke at different times in the program in different contexts. This idea, along with examples, is explored later.

TABLE 1
Number of Interns by Race and Gender vs. Number of Explicit Comments Made

	Minority male interns	Minority female interns	White male interns	White female interns
% of interns in TEP program	11.5%	11.5%	25.5%	51.5%
% of explicit comments made	10%	12%	24%	54%
Ratio of interns to comments made	1.15	1.04	1.06	0.95

Given the small number of explicit comments found in the data, I analyzed the interactions surrounding each comment, specifically what kind of responses these comments were receiving, either from a peer or instructor. Of all explicit references made, only half were followed up by a related comment. The other half of the time, there was either no response or simply an affirmation from the professor such as a nod or "OK," before moving on to another topic. The following two vignettes provide examples of explicit references to race and class.

In the first example, the class was discussing the excessive publicity surrounding Princess Diana and how the media contributed to the commercialization of females. Lee, an Asian American intern, shared the example of a professional woman who married a Japanese prince, and how the media dropped her story after one week. He asked, "What culture and race do we hold up in the media?" No one responded to his query, and the discussion turned to other topics.

The second vignette took place during a whole group meeting of the CHS interns. This group met weekly at the principal's request to keep him informed on their experiences in the school.

One intern shared a recent lesson plan from his English class, in which students used Jerry Springer's talk show format to debate the dilemmas in a book they had read. In concluding his description, the intern commented, "The students see me as an awkward, geeky White guy, but they like me anyway and go along with my crazy ideas" (he laughed and rocked back in his chair). There was no response, and the next intern who spoke proceeded to share his own classroom story.

If social reality is largely constructed through conversation with others, then the response to a comment or the lack thereof can be a powerful tool in shaping a joint construction of a shared reality. If a speaker receives no response or a response to only part of his or her comment, the speaker may learn through negative reinforcement to withhold certain comments (see Philips, 1972, for discussion of response ratification). Reactions to explicit comments included changing the topic, ignoring the speaker, or responding only to the non-racialized part of the comment. These discourse strategies can be used by listeners to reinforce group norms of interaction regarding sensitive topics.

The content of the explicit comments was examined next, to determine if the content had any relationship to the lack of responses. The content of explicit comments can be divided into two major categories: (a) insider knowledge about a particular culture and (b) an active stance towards societal and personal racism. The former engendered no discussion; the latter were made by both minority and majority students and received responses about 50% of the time.

In the first instance, insider comments refer to those made by a member of a particular racial group. For example, a White person might comment on their unique perspective, or a person of color might make a comment about racial discrimination they experiences. In one example, the interns were discussing *The Education and Killing of Edmund Perry*, a book about a Black youth who attended a private, predominantly White school through the ABC (A Better Chance) program. An African American intern shared that most of the minorities in his school had been ABC students. Silence followed for several seconds. The professor finally spoke and asked, "Can anyone make a connection between this book and *Guns, Germs, and Steel* [another course text]?"

The second category, an active stance towards racism, received responses approximately 50% of the time (see Table 2). When a White intern raised the question, "Does anyone have any thoughts about the School District's lawsuit claiming racial bias in State funding…," another White intern responded with a lengthy discourse about the Superintendent. The only reference to the bias aspect of the initial question was, "The claim won't work." This pattern of not responding or selectively responding to parts of someone's contribution without mentioning the explicit aspect(s) was seen in both university classrooms and meetings at CHS. In both vignettes, the interns as a group did not pursue topics related to race which were raised by their peers.

TABLE 2
Type of Comment vs. Response Frequency

Comments by Topical Category	Comments Made	Responses Received
Insider comments about a particular race/culture	7	0
Active stance towards racism	30	14

These kinds of discourse strategies – silence or a selective response – can potentially be face-saving for the person providing the response. If the topic is generally considered to be sensitive in nature or even taboo, then the listener may attempt to provide a response which recognizes the speaker's statement while at the same time diffusing the social tension surrounding the topic. This strategy on the listener's part can allow for resolution of a potentially uncomfortable situation, but the opportunity for critical reflection in a guided academic context is lost.

Finally, I explored the context in which the explicit talk occurred. A number of factors appeared to contribute to or foster explicit dialogue. In particular, a task focus on race or class, use of small groups, and limitations on feedback all co-occurred with increased frequency of explicit discussion. Table 3 highlights the findings for one type of task –

student presentations. All examples of explicit discourse within student presentations across several TEP classes were sorted according to assignment instructions. When a focus on race/class existed in the assignment, six times as many interns included explicit talk in their presentations.

TABLE 3
Nature of the Activity and Explicit Comments Made

Activity Structure	Explicit Comments Made
Student presentations; race-/class-related assignment	20
Student presentations; topic open, no specific race-/class-related focus	3

Similarly, across all major activity types found in the TEP program, the number of explicit comments was greater in contexts where there was a specified focus on race/class. Professors established the focus verbally or in writing. One example occurred during a text-sharing activity in English Methods. The instructor asked interns to share a brief passage from their portfolios and no comments would be allowed. An Asian-American intern who rarely spoke shared, "I feel like I'm in a museum of minorities, with majority members looking in, taking notes, and congratulating themselves on being multiculturally aware." It is possible that, by limiting the responses of the listeners, the nature of this activity removes some fear of having to defend or explain a potentially

TABLE 4
Number of explicit comments initiated according to classroom activity and focus

Classroom Activity	# of Explicit Comments Initiated	Race/Class Focus for Task or Course
Questions asked during lecture	8	100% occurred in lecture with specific race/class focus
Whole group, open discussion	24	50% occurred with race-/class-focused topic
Whole group, no response allowed	3	no specific race/class focus
Whole group, on-line discussion	2	no specific race/class focus
Whole group, student presentations	23	87% occurred in task with specific race/class emphasis
Small group report out to large group	4	75% occurred in context with specific race/class emphasis
Small group discussion	7	71% occurred in task with race/class emphasis

offensive or otherwise misconstrued comment. It is important to note that in this form of activity, critical reflection through conversation was not fostered. Table 4 displays the number of explicit comments initiated according to classroom activity and focus on race/class.

Circumventing Explicit Talk

In the context of this study – relatively affluent, predominantly White interns teaching in local schools serving predominantly low-income, African American students – it would seem difficult to ignore issues of economics or race. However, in the US, talking about issues of race and class is generally considered taboo, especially in mixed race or all-white groups (Tatum 1997). The following is a list of ways in which the interns circumvented the need for explicit talk:

> • back-channeling as a form of active listening, and as a form of avoiding active engagement in the topic
> • changing the subject
> • silence or no response to explicit questions, and no participation by White interns in explicit classroom discussions between minority interns
> • laughter in uncomfortable moments and to express co-membership.

Given that the interns rarely used explicit language to talk about issues of urban education and were quite adept at utilizing a range of discourse strategies to talk indirectly about these issues, I decided to examine how the interns were portraying their high school students through this indirect language, and how the interns were constructing images of themselves as urban teachers. Previous research found predominantly negative representations of urban students: rowdy, apathetic toward school, and disrespectful (Gilbert 1997). The data in the present study yielded similar findings. Across a year's worth of audio-taped on-site meetings, the dominant picture of the students at Coventry High School included the following:

> (1) not being on grade level
> (2) not wanting to do work in school or home
> (3) chronically poor attendance
> (4) low reading levels and unwillingness or fear of trying
> to read
> (5) neediness in terms of teacher's time and attention
> (6) illegal activities, including drug use and weapons
> possession.

These images constitute a deficit model approach to understanding the issues facing these students. The problems were situated within the students themselves, which allowed the interns to leave the responsibility for possible solutions with the students as well. In contrast to this

negative picture, there were some positive examples of students who had potential or were succeeding in this difficult environment. However, these examples were isolated and represented an alternative discourse, not the interns' dominant discourse.

The words, intonations, pauses, and gestures which encapsulate ideas can also shape, constrain, or expand them. In the case of the present research, the majority of talk contained negative representations of CHS students. It might have been very difficult, in the face of so many negative messages, to find, listen to, and believe the alternative discourses of achievement, success, and hope (Trinch, 2005). This research has specific implications for teacher educators and teacher education programs, particularly those which seek to prepare teachers to effectively serve students of color in diverse settings.

Implications and Recommendations for Teacher Education Programs

The following recommendations are taken from the findings of this study, and are supported by current literature in the field of anti-racist, multicultural education (Delpit, 1995; Derman-Sparks & Brunson Phillips, 1997; Henry, 1997; hooks, 1994; Kivel, 1996; Richard-Amato & Snow, 1992; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Weis & Fine, 1993; and Zeichner, Melnick, & Gomez, 1996). Given that racism is a socially constructed and maintained concept which is continually reproduced in social interactions, it is important for interns and faculty to examine their own role as raced individuals in these interactions and to examine their perceptions of those with whom they interact (Chubbuck, 2004; Thompson 2006). Faculty need to talk among themselves and with interns about issues of race and class – not as experts lecturing on abstract, theoretical concepts, but as individuals who have a certain racial classification (according to society's constructs of race) and a specific socioeconomic status (Cochran-Smith 1995; Racial Legacies 1999; Wing Sue, 1997). The results of this study suggest that individuals at advanced stages of racial awareness are more likely to have explicit discussions about race and class than less racially-aware individuals (Bakari, 2005). Helms (1990) suggested that active engagement with racial issues can take place in groups of mixed levels of racial awareness, but this requires effective facilitation by a group leader who is aware of his or her own racial identity as well as being aware of the various stages of racial awareness of the group members.

In order to prepare interns to be effective educators of diverse populations, it is important for both White and minority interns to understand that the White legacy in America is not solely one of racism and classism. Teacher education programs can include workshops on the history of White allies in America's struggle against racism, covering

Viola Liuzzo, Michael Schwerner, Morris Dees, and others who have fought for the cause of anti-racism (Lindqvist 1995; Tatum 1994). If professors are not versed in this history, then the learning can be shared by both interns and faculty in a collaborative context. To extend beyond the boundaries of race, curricula can include the histories of social activists across the spectrum of diversity.

For interns of any racial background, who are from the middle or upper classes, it is important for them to examine the boundaries of social class which constrain their worldviews. The minority-race interns in the present study made reference to the disconnect between their backgrounds of privilege and the backgrounds of the students they served. Teacher educators must be careful not to reduce discussions of diversity to Black/White issues, or to assume that skin color alone will make minority teacher candidates into effective urban educators. Diversity education must include discussions of broad interpretations of difference – including race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, language, and disability. Differences in cultural frames of reference can affect the dynamics of the classroom – how the teacher's authority is regarded, how homework is handled, etc. When misunderstandings arise, the student most often suffers, because the teacher's (and the school's) worldview is upheld.

As part of preparing interns to effectively teach in urban schools, teacher education programs should consider providing literacy training to all interns, regardless of their subject matter area. Schools of education can also make interns aware of the community-based health and social service organizations which are available. The interns can be encouraged or required to complete volunteer service in such organizations, to further understand the dynamics of racism and classism in the daily reality of urban life.

The faculty and administration can also examine their own ranks and consider how to foster diversity within their own groups. Both interns and faculty can encourage the administration to recruit, retain, and graduate students of color and to hire, retain, and promote faculty of color. Some teacher education programs have explored specifically recruiting interns who express a clear interest in working in urban schools with minority students (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Additional ideas include providing interns with cultural guides or anti-racism mentors, observations of schools successfully serving minority students, and observations of master teachers using culturally relevant pedagogy (Lipka, Hogan, Webster, Yanez, Adams, Clark, & Lacy, 2005; Navarro, 2005; Pollock, 2006).

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