

The Seventh International Conference  
on Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices

Pathways to Change in Teacher Education:  
Dialogue, Diversity and Self-Study

AUGUST 3 - 7, 2008

HERSTMONCEUX CASTLE, EAST SUSSEX, ENGLAND

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## What Happens When *Crash* Collides with *Dead Poets Society*?

*Dead Poets Society* (Weir & Schulman, 1989) is a movie set in the late 1950s. The predominantly White cast portrays the classroom and personal lives inside an American east coast school for boys. The school's creed is "tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence" – while the film's protagonist encourages his students toward a philosophy of "*Carpe diem*" or "seize the day!" The school's environment is well-manicured, the students are well-mannered, and the atmosphere is seemingly well-controlled. The movie *Crash* (Haggis, Moreseo, Cheadle, Schulman & Yari, 2004), on the other hand, is set in 21st century Los Angeles and is loud, busy, urbane, gritty, and simultaneously physically and emotionally explosive. This is summarized in the opening line, "Sometimes we crash into each other just so we can feel." The *Crash* script and diverse cast propel the viewer throughout the film's increasing racial tension toward explosive and unexpected ending.

In this paper I will use the *Crash* and *Dead Poets Society* movies as metaphors for the 20th and 21st centuries. This metaphor will be extended to include my current work and as a theme for my self-study. Miller, East, Fitzgerald, Heston and Veenstra (2002) describe metaphor as an "essential tool for making meaning" (pg. 81) and a "safe place for introspection" (pg. 84). Eisner (1991) speaks of the precision that metaphors offer in revealing life. Metaphorical process, understanding one thing in terms of another, helps us to see our present in a new way (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The following list contrasts the major characteristics of the films and the centuries:

<u>Dead Poets Society</u>	<u>Crash</u>
1959	2005
Ideal	Truth
Modernism	Post-Modernism
- Repressed combustion	- Explosive anger
Absolute Perspective	Multiple Perspectives
- Black and White	- Grey
Homogeneous	Diverse
Appearances	Results

Throughout most of the early 20th century, America held an idealized myth of the "all-American family": two parents, 2.5 children, one car, and a house with a white picket fence (i.e., the world as portrayed in *Dead Poets Society*). This dominant discourse included a homogeneous Christian population with predictable and orderly lives. Individuals of color and alternative beliefs were marginalized and or ignored. The issues of the 21st century require Americans to confront our current reality of a diverse society and to re-evaluate the 20th century with a new perspective (i.e., the world as portrayed in *Crash*). This paradigm transformation has profound implications for teacher preparation, teacher educators, and those of us charged with the continuing development of educators.

The focus of this paper is my intellectual (Schon, 1987) and personal journey as a Black consultant facilitating introspective dialogues about race (Singleton & Linton, 2006) and presenting Michigan and Oakland County achievement gap overviews to predominantly White educators. I started this journey with the quandary of translating the achievement disparity literature into practical and applicable terms for teachers and administrators. The inflammatory and potentially divisive conversations about racial reconciliation add layers of complexity to this impending collision. The bitter legacy of racial strife is not solved in one professional development session and people are generally not comfortable with ambiguity, multiple-perspectives, and not having closure (Greene, 1997). I work in Oakland County, north of the city center of the Detroit, Michigan metropolitan area. In the state of Michigan public education is divided into three major educational agencies: a) the Michigan Department of Education, overseeing the education systems for the state; b) Intermediate School Districts (ISD) or regional service agencies, servicing school districts in a defined geographical area; and c) local public school districts. At the Oakland ISD, I serve as a Leadership Consultant for the 28 school districts in Oakland County.

One of my responsibilities as a Leadership Consultant is to assist our school districts with meeting the requirements of the landmark educational legislation, The

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed into law in 2002. This legislation requires each school to meet strict proficiency standardized achievement levels and demonstrate annual growth. A valuable stipulation of this law is the annual reporting of aggregated and disaggregated (i.e., gender, race, special needs) data. Herein lies the crux of much of the perturbation for many of the Oakland County districts: The disaggregated data for their Black students display an uncomfortable truth and are provoking schools to begin confronting the issue of race in education. In Oakland County, Black student achievement, as measured by the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP), lags behind the achievement of White and Asian students by 10% in early elementary school and by more than 40% in high school. Under NCLB, schools are in danger of being identified as “failing” if the achievement of the disaggregated populations continues to lag.

In the last five years the Oakland County community has been shifting from a homogenous middle and upper-middle class area toward increasing economic, ethnic, and racial diversity (i.e., transitioning from *Dead Poets Society* to *Crash*). The experienced teaching cadre of Oakland County is overwhelmingly White, female, and unprepared for this transition. There is a growing cultural chasm between faculties and students and their families. A reorientation is needed to enable educators to cross this cultural divide to sustain viable connections (Greene, 1997). The history of segregation in the metropolitan Detroit area compounds the severity of the recent demographic trends. In many of the districts, the minority students are recent transfers (1-3 years) prompting the teachers to complain of their lack of academic preparation. While this influx of students includes Asian, Arabic, and Latino ethnicities, the increase in Black students induces the most consternation. During multiple consulting sessions throughout Oakland County I hear the following comments: “They come with so many deficits,” “Those students are not used to our way of doing things,” and “These parents do not value education in the same way as our other families.”

Closing this achievement gap (Ferguson, 2002; Noguera, 2001; Sen, 2006) for Black students is a priority for the Oakland ISD, Oakland University, and the 28 Oakland County districts. A recent alliance of these entities called the Learning Achievement Coalition of Oakland (LACO) has been organized to align resources, ideas, and direction to confront this issue. In most of my training sessions I am the only Black person in the room and when there are other Blacks present, they are usually female. The internal tension (Northfield & Loughran, 1997) I initially experienced ignited my quest to keep journal field notes and seek feedback and peer coaching (Louie, Drevdahl, Perry & Stockman, 2003).

My initial impetus for presenting achievement gap overviews and fostering “courageous conversations about race” (Singleton & Linton, 2006) aligns with Ladson-Billings’ (2003) admonitions to challenge the structures of racism in schools. Adding the self-study

framework broadened my reflective concentration to understanding my role in the context of these transformative experiences (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003) and how theory emerges from development of my practice (Freebody, 2003). In this way my intellectual journey takes on multiple reflective tracks: a) encouraging Oakland County educators to examine their beliefs and practices; b) using my self-study focus to reflect on my practice; c) identifying emerging theory in my practice; and c) applying theory to my practice (Silverman, 2005).

Silverman (2005) demonstrates the distinction between focus and aim in qualitative research (see Table 1). *Emotionalism* examines feelings that prompt a response. *Constructivism* accepts that new knowledge, or responses, are not passively received but actively created and re-created.

Table 1

	Emotionalism	Constructivism
Focus	Meaning Emotion	Behavior
Aim	Authentic Insights	Phenomena Construction

In Table 2, I expand this theoretical framework for the intellectual journey I experience as I work with the Oakland County districts. Renaming the Emotionalism column *Introspection in Action* and the Constructivism column *Adaptability in Action* encapsulates my reflective journey of analyzing my cognitive process (Crowe & Whitlock, 1999).

Table 2\*

	Introspection in Action	Adaptability in Action
Qualitative Focus	Meaning	Behavior
Qualitative Aim	Insight	Constructing new meaning
Self-Study Focus	Self-examination (Louie et al., 2003) Self-monitoring	Reflection-in- action (Schon, 1987) Intuitive decisions
Self-Study Aim	Learning (Loughran, 2007) Growth Zone of the unknown (Nachmanovitch, 1990)	Frame and reframe (Northfield, 1996) Improved self-practice Improvisation as intuition in action (Nachmanovitch, 1990)

\*Revised by R. A. Martin from Silverman (2005).

The major challenge is the constant requests from teachers for practical strategies they can immediately implement. A major component of dealing with the issue of race and the achievement disparity is educators going through their own mini self-studies—reflecting on their



actions, making meaning of their actions, and improving their interaction with each individual student. This work is introspective, slow, and difficult; it is also the exact opposite of requests such as, "Give me something I can use in my classroom tomorrow!", or "Just give us the strategies for working with Black boys!" I am responding to this challenge in two ways, based on the expanded Silverman Framework. First, I have become more explicit in telling participants that the first and most important step is their individual and collective reflection and making a decision if they believe each child is capable of high achievement. Second, at Oakland Schools we publish a *Closing the Achievement Gap Toolkit* (Martin, 2007) for educators to use in faculty meetings, professional development sessions, and for their own development. The foundation of the toolkit is guidance for facilitated book studies, article reviews, and vignette discussions. It is not the quick fix they sought, but something tangible to grow the conversations throughout the County and to build individual capacity in the districts.

### **SO, WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CRASH COLLIDES WITH DEAD POETS SOCIETY?**

At the onset of this work I hesitated to place myself as an active participant during the sessions. My training teaches me to approach facilitation as a neutral observer, tracking the direction and pattern of the dialogue. Therefore, I left many of my personal experiences and opinions out of the early sessions. After multiple discussions with peers (Louie et al., 2003) I came to realize that the sensitive topic of race demands a new approach (Loughran, 2007) with me emotionally engaged, fully present, and vulnerable (Northfield & Loughran, 1997). During these peer review conversations we debriefed my goals and expectations, and I reflected on my personal role throughout the session. My initial distance worked as a defense mechanism to prevent participant comments from offending me, my attempt to control the situation. I wanted the educators in the session to develop informed empathy for their students (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and to begin looking through their students' eyes (Greene, 1997). Attempting to emotionally protect myself only served to stifle participant risk-taking and exploration. My colleagues helped me to trust the process and to embrace the objectives through sharing my life, challenges, and triumphs. Singleton & Linton (2006) promote a technique of written racial autobiographies and an area principal encouraged me to compose my own. With some hesitancy, I wrote my own racial autobiography and successfully introduced it at selected presentations. Passion fuels my commitment to following this work to maturity, but it also makes it intensely personal. Through this process of self-study I am attempting to build a bridge of continuity and compatibility between my knowledge, passion and practice (Crowe & Whitlock, 1999).

I employ the technique of reviewing and reflecting on the participant evaluations (Loughran & Gunstone, 1996) and field notes from my various professional

development sessions on race and the achievement gap. In the spirit of making my problems transparent (Northfield, 1996), I will share anonymous written comments that are hurtful, but impel me to reflect on reflection-in-action (Schon, 1995) and reconsider my decisions and responses:

*You speak as if there is a problem here! We do not have an achievement gap and the Blacks and Whites get along just fine.* (From a 2007 session)

*Why are we talking about race? I wouldn't work here if I was a racist and didn't want to work with these kids.* (From a 2007 session)

*Just tell me what strategies to use! I don't need to reflect...* (From a 2006 session)

These comments reveal a couple of points to me: a) the depth of discomfort many Whites feel when discussing race in the context of their work; and b) the amount of preparatory work needed, on my part, to present a holistic and comprehensive framework of the function of race in student achievement. My unrealistic expectations for the amount of material I expected to cover in my presentations needed adjustment. Everyone is frustrated without ample process and discussion time.

Early in this work I experienced clumsiness in difficult circumstances. At one professional development session, a teacher responded in front of a crowd of 50 with, "It sounds as if you expect me to bow down to these Black kids, (as she repeatedly genuflected for everyone to view) and I won't do it!" Thirty seconds later when I recovered from my shock, I mumbled an incoherent response and moved on with the presentation. In a subsequent private conversation, this teacher and I reached a mutual understanding; but, my public mishandling of this episode caused me to reflect more deeply on my teaching and professional development presentations (Dinkelman, 2003). Crowe & Whitlock (1999) emphasize how reflection adds to the educative power of experience (Reflection + Experience = Wisdom). Because of this incident I adjusted my preparation, intonation, and professional development presentation style. Whenever possible I now co-create the sessions with input from the school leadership team. I take the time to know the audience and enter the discussion at a developmental point where they are comfortable, before moving immediately to areas of discomfort. I am less ambitious with the amount of content I expect to cover in each session and allow more space for reflection and interaction. Most importantly, I give myself fully to each session and share more of myself.

In many ways, I am a good candidate to facilitate these sensitive conversations throughout Oakland County. I am old enough and experienced enough to have garnered a resume (teacher, assistant principal, headmaster, principal, consultant) to warrant an initial moment of attention. I am not an angry or hostile Black

man, and I am not on a mission to impart guilt or blame. My experiences as a trailblazer (the first Black teacher and administrator at Lockett Christian Academy; the only Black teacher (for a few years) at Southfield-Lathrup High School; the first Black lay leader at the Rochester Church of Christ; and the only Black male consultant at the Oakland ISD combined) enable me to be comfortable in facilitating intense dialogues with White educators.

Miller et al. (2002, pg. 86) ask two questions of a metaphor that is worth addressing at this point. The first question is, "What does this metaphor hide?" I believe the *Crash/Dead Poets Society* metaphor hides the disappointment and heartbreak I experience while working with these issues throughout Oakland County. My intellectual and personal journey continues as I grapple with being open with my emotions while not allowing them to become a stumbling block. Conversely, the sincerity I perceive from student and parent focus groups motivates me to continue colliding on this topic until momentum is embedded and sustained throughout the County is hidden also. The second question is, "What is this metaphor missing?" The most important characters this metaphor misses are the students of Oakland County. This paper is about my self-study around this work of racial reconciliation and the achievement disparity, but the work is ultimately about the students. Also, this metaphor does not take into account the many fine professionals at Oakland Schools, Oakland University and the educators throughout Oakland County, that care deeply about this work, and partner in moving this issue forward.

### SEEK A NEW PATH

When *Crash* collides with *Dead Poets Society*, my suggestion is to listen to *Ragtime!* In his 1975 novel, *Ragtime*, Doctorow tells the interweaving story of three groups in early 20th century America: a) Whites; b) Jewish immigrants; and c) Blacks. In 1998, the musical version of *Ragtime* debuted in New York with three central characters representing the various groups: a) Mother, a White and wealthy suburban mom; b) Tateh, a Latvian Jew; and c) Coalhouse, a Black Harlem musician. Mother develops an early friendship with Coalhouse as he plays her piano and she begins to appreciate his "new music" and builds her first friendship across racial lines. Near the end of *Ragtime*, Coalhouse urges his comrades to persist in telling their story of injustice, to "make them hear you." At the conclusion of the musical Tateh marries the widowed Mother and promises to help forge a "new social order" using the examples of compassion and acceptance with children across multi-cultural lines: Mother's son, Tateh's daughter, and Coalhouse's son.

As Tateh longed for a new social order, Oakland County is faced with the new order demographic changes bring to our schools. Bateson (1990) encourages us to co-create a new reality, to find our way together. The path to cultural understanding and racial reconciliation is not perfectly clear to me – but I know what

does not work! Ignoring differences, pretending to get along on the surface, or isolating our lives from those who are different extends the racial challenges without hope for resolution. There is a part of my facilitation where I am a "Coalhouse," teaching new music or the impact of the achievement disparity throughout the County. At Oakland Schools we invest a considerable amount of time exposing the superintendents and central administrators to this new music. In my Tateh role as ambassador to the White educators or "Mother," I urge them to re-conceptualize their work and initiate a new reality with their students and families of color. Tatum (1997) encourages White educators to serve as mentors, coaches, and advocates. As a Black academic, I urge the Black students and families to persist in connecting at school and to "make them [Oakland County educators] hear" and understand the concerns and needs of Black students and their families. My *outsider* or *other* perspective helps me to serve as bridge in this unique situation - between White academia and mainstream Blacks. Neither the chaos in *Crash* nor the delusion in *Dead Poets Society* offer a sustainable solution. It is in *Ragtime* that I find affirmation, forgiveness, connection, and hope for racial reconciliation and closing the achievement gap.

"There is no need to alter your voice in order to please others, and no need to alter it in order to differentiate yourself from others. Quality arises from, and is recognized by, resonance with inner truth" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 179). Asserting my voice in this self-study process serves as one of the most challenging endeavors I have undertaken. I take solace and find strength in knowing that the more I am myself, the more universally my message will be accepted (Nachmanovitch, 1990).

As an individual, I am a child of *Dead Poets Society*: born in 1956, serving a career in education for 29 years, and married 27 years with two sons in college. But life casts me as the *other* in various circumstances: Black male, intellectual identity, compassionate personality, conservative personal values, liberal politics, and a racial trailblazer. Because of my counter-intuitive perspective, my allegiance leans toward *Crash*. In other words, I live *Dead Poets Society*, and I speak *Crash* - but my heart, aspirations, and future are with *Ragtime*.

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**SUNDAY, AUGUST 3, 2008**

Time	EVENTS
05:30-07:00	DINNER
07:00-08:30	Mary Dalmau & Hafdis Guðjónsdóttir

**MONDAY, AUGUST 4, 2008**

Time	Room A (Techy)	Room B (Techy)	Room C	Room D	Room E
09:00-09:50	Ronnie Davey Vince Ham	Linda Crafton Louanne Smolin	Peter Aubusson et al	Lesley Cola	John Loughran
10:00-10:50	Morwenna Griffiths et al.  <i>Selves &amp; Spaces &amp; Doing Research</i>	Barbara Henderson	Clare Kosnik Clive Beck Viola Cleovouliou	Geoff Mills	Katheryn East Linda Fitzgerald Mary Manke
11:00-11:20	TEA				
11:30-12:20	Rosamund Winter	Nancy Hutchinson Andrea K. Martin Shawn Bullock	James Muchmore	Nathan Brubaker	Jerome Allender Donna Allender
12:30-01:50	LUNCH				
02:00-02:50	Jack Whitehead	Robyn Brandenburg Amanda Berry Joseph Senese	Nancy Brown Robert Wiggins David Secord	Mary Lynn Hamilton	Ruth Mansur Marga Simca
03:00-03:50	Deborah Tidwell Lisa Wymore	Cheryl Craig	Jason Ritter Dave Powell Todd Hawley	Shawn Bullock Tom Russell	Ann Schulte
04:00-04:20	TEA				
04:30-05:20	Deborah Rose	Darlene Cluffetelli Parker	Renee Clift	Jeffrey Kuzmic Leslie Bloom	Julian Kitchen
05:30-07:00	DINNER				
07:00-08:30	After Dinner Discussion, Pub				

**TUESDAY, AUGUST 5, 2008**

Time	Room A	Room B	Room C	Room D
09:00-09:50	Jack Whitehead Marie Huxtable	Dawn Garbett	Deanna Breslin et al.	Azza Sharkawy Tom Russell
10:00-10:50	Shaun Murphy Eliza Pinnegar Steffnee Pinnegar	Susan Constable et al.	Alana James	Jill Beloff Farrell Mark Rosenkrantz
11:00-11:20	TEA			
11:30-12:20	Rosanne Zwart Janneke Geursen Arl de Heer	Ariela Gidron Smadar Tuval Judith Barak	Lindsey Conner Elaine Mayo	Katheryn East Jodi Meyer-Mork
Afternoon	Outing			
06:00-08:00	BARDIC DINNER			

**WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 6, 2008**

Time	Room A	Room B	Room C	Room D	Room E
09:00–09:50	Alan Ovens Dawn Garbett	Diane Lang Christina Siry	Kelly Donnell	Derek Anderson et al.	Penny Silvers
10:00–10:50	Dashia Magee	Rebecca Cooper Stephen Keast	Mary Rice	Lynn Thomas Catherine Beauchamp	Gregg Gassman
11:00–11:20	TEA				
11:30–12:20	Jean Schneider	Lynette Erickson Janet Young	Mathabo Khau Lungile Masinga Kathleen Pithouse	Lea Kozminsky et al.	Mandy Frake-Mistak Christine Cho
12:30–01:50	LUNCH				
02:00–02:50	Marie Huxtable	Robert Martin	Mary Manke Jerry Allender	Bonni Gourneau	
03:00–03:50	Carolyn Chryst Cynthia Lassonde Zanna McKay	Maureen O'Rourke Loren Peavey Bill Eckersley	Judy Williams	Melissa Heston	Elaine Mayo Kay Henson Helen Smith
04:00–04:20	TEA				
04:30–05:20	Morwenna Griffiths <i>Selves &amp; Spaces &amp; Doing Research</i>	Cynthia Nicol et al.	Dina Friling Bobbie Turniansky	Sai Badali	Julian Kitchen
05:30	PHOTO OPPORTUNITY				
05:45–07:00	Dinner				

**THURSDAY, AUGUST 7, 2008**

Time	
09:00–11:30	Mary Dalmau & Hafdis Guðjónsdóttir Conference Debriefing: Melissa Heston, Deb Tidwell, Kathryn East & Linda Fitzgerald