ADDRESSING RACISM FROM CLASSROOM TEACHING

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ABSTRACT: As teachers striving to create a democratic and safe classroom 'space' that is open to varied views and perspectives we often struggle when it comes to discussions on racism and islamophobia. Some students withdraw from classroom debate and remain silent, whilst others, speak out those personal views on specific 'race' debates. As an educationalist, I see my job as a teacher in the classroom to help students to challenge racism and to encourage changed thinking. I argue that our students should be directed to anti- racist, anti-sexist, indeed against all sorts of oppressive ideas. I ask in this paper, "What can educationalists do to undo racism that emerges from teaching and learning moments? This paper offers examples of teaching exchanges from classroom teaching that explores ways of teaching against racism. It underlines the importance of anti-racism as it emerges organically within classroom engagement and exchange. This paper explores student views and perspectives on 'race' sensitive issues and examines the benefits in drawing out racialised comments that emerge from classroom debates. The underlying interest for the writer is to examine the ways in which such classroom interaction, dialogue and exchanges can inform anti-racist thinking and critique. Student centred learning, where student voice and perspectives are welcomed in the critique against racism, is about opening up new and important debates about ethnicity and identity in education. I argue here, that classroom debates can interrogate the common-sense racism that exists in ones thinking. This article draws from a seminar discussion *moment* when a small number of students shared their views on religious dress and educational issues.

Key words: racism and education

INTRODUCTION

This paper critically explores student dialogue and counter dialogue that emerge from class discussions. I argue here that minority common sense voices can act as counter narrative to mainstream views on racism and other issues. It is suggested that classroom exchanges can help provoke in students critical thought and self-reflection. Such dialogue can become the material that informs anti-racist thinking in Higher Education. This article suggests that as teachers we have to make use of the varied student comments as ways of challenging racist thinking. Students' engaged participation in class is paramount to this endeavour.

Teaching race and racism is probably the most difficult subject I teach. Why? Because minority ethnic students come to class with their own version of history, their own understanding of social inequalities and own experiences of discrimination. These students common –sense voice, is often presented as all knowing, as real and authentic. These sentiments are often loaded with 'our racism is more serious and damaging, than yours'. I have heard African-Caribbean students say, 'nothing compares with the days of slavery', Muslim students say, 'it's the Muslims that are now being criminalized, and failed by the school system, this racism is more perverse'. These students draw from personal experience, sometimes informed by crime survey statistics, and headline news, but in the main from their own lived experience of racism. They speak with authority. The majority white students *sometimes* interject these discussions with less confidence. This paper explores ways in which student centered teaching and learning methods can best be used for educational gains. I argue that the student voice articulated via common-sense experiences could be woven into our critical understanding of our worlds and give them value. The challenge for teachers/lecturers is to help make the shift from the 'gutsy' emotional common sense knowing to a more rational sociological critique of the issues.

One of sociology's tasks is to challenge 'common sense' thinking. C. Wright Mills made this claim in 1959 when he said

> "The Sociological Imagination' enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its promise" (6)

The critical nature of thinking sociologically, he argued, is the ability to connect 'the personal trouble of milieu' to the historical forces and social processes of the societies and people that produced it. This sociological imagination then is presented as the fruit of years of rigorous nurture and disciplined pruning by academics. I argue here that if we accept this pruning, the classroom becomes as hooks says a 'field where we all labour" (1994)

Too often, in my experience, the concern to encourage rigorous sociological thought has supported what Freier (1972) has called banking model of learning and teaching – where the class is the one-way depository of knowledge from teacher to student. As a result of critical pedagogy, I work to challenge this conception and the classroom practices it encourages. Through student led seminars and group work, I make space for more reflective and evaluative teaching and learning experiences. The aim is to construct the classroom as less of a one-way information-giving depository to more of a space of knowledge exchange and creation.

My efforts at engaged pedagogy, where communication flows around the group through the facilitator; would not suit all students and staff. However, my experience of it suggests that collaborative and interactive teaching and learning can do two important things. It can encourage more wide-ranging sociological imaginations and can validate critical elements in 'common sense' thinking. This is because student-centred teaching methods have the potential to reshuffle the power between and within student grouping and lecturers/teachers. This approach also opens up the room to comments, stories and worldviews that can develop analysis way beyond the textbooks.
By drawing from their own 'cultural reservoirs' – students can be transformed into active learners. Engaged dialogue, albeit from common-sense 'knowing', can be used to inform the formal teaching and learning exchanges in class and allow for a reflective and critical stance on broader social realities.

My concern as a 'teacher/facilitator' is to make our classrooms reflect the world as we would have it. They should be interactive and collaborative arenas, where the teaching and learning methods and processes are interchangeable places where we all create knowledge. As social science academics, we need to hear the stories of the people we teach, study, and theorize. These narratives might run counter to our sociological imaginations, and 'common sense'. In this they are to be welcomed. Issues around race and racism are one area where, in my experience, everyday, non-academic narratives will run counter to our academically correct '*knowledge*'. I have developed a method that allows for people to be heard and to be critical of the 'common-senses' of themselves and the powerful. It draws on my own experiences and insights gathered from critical pedagogy perspectives which demands that all knowledge, not only 'official knowledge', be taught critically.

To share that method, I have focused on a particular critical classroom moment. The comments cited are drawn from my field/dairy notes of student discussions. I want to show how classroom exchanges can provoke critical thought and self-reflection in a group. In this, the classroom dialogue, debate and disagreement can be the material that
shapes anti-racist thinking in Higher Education. Part of this process of provoking syntheses is using students' experiences of racism and making visible systems of exploitation, privilege and oppression. This critical uncovering of the structures, processes and experiences that underpin, maintain and challenge 'common-sense' is a key part of sociological imagination.

The question is, how does one interrogate these student views? And what can teachers/facilitators do to bring out the counter race talk, /the 'Islam phobic' / anti-Muslim racism that *may* exist in our student's minds? Clearly, the most challenging moment in a race based classroom is the opening out of these views. This has to be done in a safe environment and respectable manner, with clear ground rules.

The first task for any tutor is to break the silence on the 'race' debate, once we have opened out the debate to students' dialogue, we then allow for the free-flowing contributions. Some silences suggest that some students are not so sure perhaps whether their 'common-sense' views are to be aired in university classrooms or whether they should have them at all. Given this, my efforts to engage students in discussions around 'everyday' racism, on the streets, on the buses, in the shopping malls, indeed on campus usually provoke a variety of silences. Some students both ethnic minority and majority white avoid speaking at all or do so very *uneasily* about racism. Some are too angry, others too scared and others simply anxious. (see Housee 2006) It seems that the degrees of emotional engagement and confusion combine to disconnect students from the learning environment and create silence. Others will say their 'piece' via emotional outbursts that although *can be* legitimate in their views, requires sensitive manoeuvring in an educational direction.

As a teacher committed to pedagogy rooted in critical race and feminist theory, I am continually seeking ways to interrupt these silences, and voices in an attempt to make sociological sense of students' dialogue.

I strive to create learning strategies that offer all students a safe space to voice their views and share their experiences. This is particularly important because I teach sociology classes on gender and race issues. Cultivating a learning environment where all students feel comfortable exploring these potentially explosive issues is a precondition for achieving my pedagogical goals. I argue that student engagement in the classroom can be the

beginning of changed thinking that can lead to actions against racism and sexism and other inequalities and injustices.

British Context: From Multicultural Education to anti-racist education

Britain is a socially and culturally plural society. Today the 'ethnic minority' population is diverse, with origins from countries including Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Caribbean and several African countries, and more recently, from Eastern Europe and the Baltic States. The 1970s-multicultural debate in education spoke of co-existence, integration, tolerance and diversity. In the British school curriculum, these ideas were articulated in the three 'S's' slogan of ''Samosas', Steal bands and Saris', through fashion, food, and music, difference was celebrated. This multicultural education offered tokenistic changes in curriculum, it did not link the failures, exclusions and alienation of ethnic minority children in education with the overall structures of racism within which schools' function, but instead, as said by J Solomos (in Cashmore, P and Bains, H 1988) multicultural education was

> " ..a reflection of the common-sense and policy notion that black pupils are the target group which policies should aim at since it is their (blackness) 'deficiencies and 'problems' that have to be overcome. Even when clothed in progressive language, this view tends to support the notion that it is West Indians or Asian children cause problems for schools and not vice-versa" (p171)

Such critiques of multicultural education led the path to what became known as the anti-racist movement in education. The anti-racist critique of the 1980s advocated that schools not only develop a policy statement, which unequivocally condemned all racist behavior, but also conducted open discussions including 'race awareness' workshops, and ensured that curriculum content and process help pupils to comprehend past and present racism. Educational inequality of ethnic minorities was squarely placed within the wider socio-economic inequalities that disproportionately failed and excluded Black and ethnic minority children in education. In going beyond the educational system, the anti-racist critique argued that structural and societal inequalities and institutional racism was key to the understanding of ethnic minority educational inequalities. Gillborn 1995, Troyna and Carrington, 1990)

There has been a great deal of disagreement about multicultural and anti-racist education in Britain. The relevant literature is extensive, and it is not possible to review it here, however, some of the fundamental issues are essential here to make sense of the debate of this paper. Figueroa (1999) suggests that there are three major features of society that are central to the anti-racist education debate, these he argues concerns: diversity, inequality and racism. The work for progressive educationalist he suggests is to challenge these concerns through three relevant sets of fundamental social and educational values: *pluralism* which is about acceptance and valuing difference, *diversity*: which is for equity, justice and human rights and *anti-racism*: that invites open-mindedness, inclusiveness and critical thinking. Education he suggests must address all of these aspects:

> *" the promotion of educational equality and quality, especially for ethnic minorities; but equally to the deconstructing and reconstructing of racist and ethnicist frames of reference, perceptions, stereotypes, prejudice, and patterns of relations and actions,…It must likewise focus on institutional and structural racism and the conditions that support as well as those that might help to overcome such racism. (286)*

The work in this paper follows these three values as a way of promoting anti-racist teaching strategies.

How is this to be done?

In this part of the paper I explore the theories and strategies that have developed my thinking on anti-racism in classroom.

The contribution of critical pedagogy to multicultural education has been important here. The insistence that students must be involved in the process of their own education is a central tenet of critical pedagogy, and it has inspired the inclusion of student voices that are often missing from most discussions on multiracial and anti-racist teaching.

Researchers such as Ladson-Billings and F.W Tate (1995) and Lynn (1999) have attempted to explore the links between race, culture and educational inequalities. Putting 'race' into critical pedagogy has provided ways of looking at the interrelationship of race, gender, class, culture and pedagogy, whilst, also placing the importance of theories of race and racism to teaching and learning. This inclusion of 'race' argues Lynn (2004) gives a clearer picture of black educational issues because it provides

> "an analysis of racial, ethnic and gender subordination in education that relies mostly upon the perceptions, experiences and counter-hegemonic practices of educators of color" (: 154)

Furthermore, because critical race pedagogy recognises the political nature of education and the need to challenge its content and form, anti-racist and multicultural education becomes a critical assessment of curricular, policies and practices on students. This is clearly presented in Nieto's (1992) suggestion that:

> "multicultural education must permeate the curriculum and instructional strategies…, as well as the interactions among teachers, students and parents, and the very way that schools conceptualizes … teaching and learning" (208)

Critical race pedagogy then, centers its concern with the continued racial discrimination and pedagogic issues, and highlights the importance of black cultural identities in its analysis of such issues. This is the view articulated in this article.

My argument here is, that multicultural and anti-racist education must examine not only the macro picture of policies, strategies, programs, and related practice across the entire educational endeavor, but also focuses on the micro picture of interpersonal behavior, classroom interaction, participation, and related matters. This is where student voice and the use of Black and ethnic minority experience become imperative.

Making use of individual views and experiences from classroom dialogue and exchanges are important in this attempt to create other ways of knowing (knowledge), especially when they allow for marginal voices to be heard. Such discussions, however, need to be taken further if they are to have an impact on educational experiences. These voices/stories need to be given importance by giving them educational credibility. It is not, therefore, just a matter of exchanging discourse and experiences, although this may be illuminating and interesting, it is about giving value to these exchanges, using the stories to further clarify and critique the social reality that is discussed.

In the multi-cultural/racial class of the new millennium, interactive participation and the use of marginal voices is necessary if we want to encourage democratic teaching experiences.

Students' perspectives about their educational experiences are a relatively new and growing field of enquiry. Such research is especially significant in cultural diverse classrooms. Thus, listening to what students have to say about their experiences can result in a more critical conception of multicultural education. This is not to suggest those students' views should be adopted uncritically, but to suggest that if students' views are sought through critical and problem –posing approach, their insights can be crucial for developing meaningful, and engaging educational experiences. Indeed, my own previous research on student perspectives (Housee, 2006) has suggested that students' welcome classroom interaction, input and feedback and would often make suggestions for debates in the classroom.

One way to use the experiences of students is to focus on the kinds of issues that they live with every day, in the case of minority students, this means to bring the talk of 'race', racism and discrimination to the class. Critical race pedagogy that welcomes the experiences of racialized minorities is paramount here. Maintaining safe spaces and nurturing voices and stories in the classroom is the responsibility of everyone, but most especially the teacher. In the first instance, safety and nurture reside in the skills of the teacher in providing structure for the debate and facilitating non-judgmental storytelling. Such engaged dialogue offers powerful tools for bringing out the 'racisms' in the classroom that simultaneously connect the stories of the participants with those of commentators, academics, communities and social movements.

Why should we make use of the student Voice?

Proponents of Critical Race Theory argue that the common-sense *knowledge and experience* that the minority student voice brings to class, is the counter-voice to dominant views. Ladson Billings (1995) argues that the use of 'voice' provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed; this she continues is a first step to justice. The link between CRT and education suggests that the voice of minorities is required for a complete analysis of the education system.

Marginal voices provide, in Dixson and Rousseau's words (2005)

> (a) 'Counter-story – a means to counteract or challenge the dominant story'. Such counter stories 'can be used as a tool for exposing, analyzing and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege' (11).

Many critical race theorists argue that the black voice is paramount if we are to interrogate and disrupt the dominant voice. Delgado (1989 cited in Ladson Billings and Tate1995) suggests that this is important for the following reasons:

- Much of reality is socially constructed
- Stories provide members of outgroups a vehicle for psychic self –preservation
- The exchange of stories from the teller to listener can help overcome ethnocentrism and the dysconscious conviction of viewing the world in one way.

(57)

Giving validity to counter-stories is based on a social constructionist paradigm, which argues that individuals socially construct reality. Individual perspectives and experiences are, in this view, essential to understanding the reality of a given individual. Here the use of narrative or voice is imperative to the making of knowledge. CRT's emphasis on individual experience makes use of epistemologies that welcomes experiential knowledge of reality. This is a controversial point. Although CRT holds a firm stance against notions of racial essentialism, CRT contends that the social realities of African Americans nevertheless give them experiences, voices, and viewpoints that are likely to be different from mainstream, dominant narratives. It therefore becomes imperative that African Americans advance their own counter-narratives, often via story –telling modes that fall outside the usual confines of academic discourse. This is most important when such knowledge is drawn from marginalized voices. To accept black folks sense of the world; is to accept that there are other ways of knowing that are different from the dominant, white view.

In my mind, it is important to recognize that there are many legitimate ways to construct knowledge. Feminists have long argued that epistemologies vary for people with different experiences. Women see the world from different perspectives and ask important questions, which are often specific and relevant to their lives. Our social world experiences are based on ones gendered as well as racialized, class and other social experiences. Similarly, Critical Race theorist urges us to center the experiences of black minority ethnic folks in our thinking of social knowledge. The use of black experience argues Bergerson (2003) should be seen as a legitimate method and lens for studying racism, if educational research offers only one way of understanding the world, which is

> "*grounded in the positivist or post-positivist research paradigm (then) racism, sexism, homophobia and classism in education cannot be adequately addressed. …(therefore) it is necessary to look at educational structures and institutions through the eyes of all participants, relying on their lived experiences to ensure that our research questions and methods address these difficult issues*" (60)

Teaching moments, where students and lecturers engage in critical exchanges regarding our social and political realities, can be the very material that can be used to clarify and unpick such debates.

My student responses to government-inspired hysteria over 'the veil' are evidence of this. In itself, it is no surprise that I have had exchanges with hijab (headscarf) wearing students and non-Muslim students who have brought to class critiques that have interrogated and deconstructed common sense racism, in ways that mainstream media have not attempted. However, the depth and breadth of the sociological analyses developed from critical observation, that drew on a range of personal experiences and cultural/religious positions are important in the work of anti-racism.

Active engagement in the class can challenge students' perceptions of who speaks and whose voice has value. Asian women generally, and in a post 9/11 world, Muslim women have been theorized as the most oppressed and victimized marginal group of all. Within the current climate therefore, it is important that such Female Muslim voices are heard and viewed as empowered. (Zine 2006) As a teacher committed to critical and feminist pedagogy; I am continually seeking ways of opening out the classroom to the 'race' talk, and bringing in the student experience. This is especially important to the sociology class that includes students from all walks of the racialized world that we come to belong. Indeed, I believe it is my political obligation to make possible the anti-racist thinking in class, to open up the spaces for counter narratives that offer other ways of knowing.

Students have the capacity to challenge 'master narratives', whether they are government inspired furors or the 'disengaging' curricula of institutions of higher education. Of course, this involves an element of risk. However, the real risk is not classroom management – dealing with lively debates - given appropriate group and material

preparation. For me, the larger risks involve opening out the classroom to students, and inviting them to speak from their experiences. This open forum inevitably allows for the sharing of the many perspectives that may exist in the student body. The risk here is not to share my not-fully formed views, but to allow students to gain confidence in their own thinking aloud. This of course opens out the debates to the varied views; my job at this juncture is to play the referee.

To veil or not to veil – the case of students from my class

In this part of the paper I refer to a discussion on faith schooling during my teaching on the Global Education Issues Module. This module explores gendered and racialized inequalities in education, with particular attention to the demand for separate gendered and religious education facilities. In the Class of 2007 there were 9 students (out of 48) of Muslim background. Islamophobia – anti-Muslim racism was real for many of these students. In speaking about the veil one had to be conscious and sensitive to the racism within society and the current race debate surrounding issues like the veil and Muslim faith schooling. In a climate of Islamophobia this can be very tricky. I do not want to feed the Islamophobia that may be in some of our students' mind, and I certainly do not want to alienate the Muslim students who need to be re-assured that it is safe (in class at least) to be Muslim now.

Religious dress has been the subject of great controversy in the West. France and several towns in Italy have opted to ban the hijab (headscarf) in schools, while the Dutch are considering banning the veil/ burkha or jilbab (which covers the entire head, face and body) (see C Raissiguier (2008), J. Zine 2006). The wearing or indeed of not wearing the veil has a lot of political currency. My Global Education Issues module has raised issues surrounding Identity, Multiculturalism and separate education. Our seminar discussions would often take us to these debates.

This class had spent two weeks on lectures and seminar sessions on multi-cultural and anti-racist education; we had explored separate faith school provisions with specific reference to the Muslim rights. The veil debate and the racism surrounding it had been with us since 9/11, but the interesting aspect with this case of the veil and schooling was particularly relevant to my module. Students had been raising 'race' specific comments about their schooling experience. Some of the students had argued for the need for separate schools because of the endemic racism in mainstream schools, commenting on underachievement of minority children and the lack of respect for difference. Others (some Muslim and non-Muslim students) were arguing for the importance of integration. Schools they argued should be part of the project of a multicultural education, suggesting that children should be schooled together as a preparation for diversity in society. These varied voices and issues raised from the previous seminar formed the background to the following seminar discussion.

The student narratives below are drawn from my reflective classroom diaries notes from a seminar discussion during the debate on separate schooling for Muslim children. Students were invited to comment on the subject of religion and schooling. Using the article below, I invited students to consider whether religious dress such as the headscarf (hijaab) or the full veil impedes the student/pupil learning experience.

The following is a summary of the discussion that took place during the seminar on faith schooling, religious dress wear and educational experience. The article from The Sun (March /3rd 2007: 20) newspaper was taken to class. Students were asked to think about the issue raised from the text.

SUN: March 20, 2007

SCHOOL MINISTER'S VERDICT

FACE VEILS STOP GIRLS LEARNING

EXCLUSIVE

VEILS will be banned in schools to help pupils learn and to keep them safe, Education Secretary Alan Johnson has ruled.

Dangerous

The headlines refer to a High Court ruling allowing schools the right to ban Muslim girls from wearing the full-face veil in lessons. The article speaks of two main issues that are quoted from the then (2007) Education Secretary Alan Johnson :

> *It's (*the veil*) a problem for security and it's also a problem for learning because the teacher can't see whether or not a child is understanding what's being taught."*

The article continues by making its own comments as seen in the following:

- the veil was a security risk as teachers could not instantly recognise visitors,
- it could lead to peer pressure on other Muslim girls to wear the veil,
- it made learning difficult by hiding the pupil's expression from teachers,
- it was at odds with the school's ethos of equality.

Critical Incident – classroom session.

The above article was handed out to students and used to kick start the seminar discussions. Like many teachers, I shifted between my thoughts about this issue, its importance to the learning about the freedom of dress, with the fear of the consequences that such debates could raise – such as the Islamaphobic –anti-Muslim racist reaction from some students. By making use of minority ethnic voices the teacher hopes that students would be able to share and explore the many voices that emerge from class. I wanted to use this moment to explore and critically challenge any racism that may emerge from the classroom debate. I argue here, that if we want to encourage students to speak on sensitive issues, such as veiling to a multi racial classroom, like this class, where there was a full veil wearing student with 8 other Muslim students in the class, some wearing the hijab and others not, then we take the challenge and speak openly to these issues.

The discussion below is drawn from diary notes taken from this seminar class on the veil in schools. Class was given the above handout from the Sun and given 10 minutes to read this article. The class was divided into small discussion groups and asked to consider these questions:

- In what ways does the veil impede educational experience?
- In what ways, did they see the veil being a health and safety issue?
- What were their views on the removal of the veil in class?

The class broke up into groups of four or five for small group discussion. I circulated and spoke to the smaller groups, group discussion continued for around 20 minutes. The class was then asked to resume to a plenary for a full discussion with their comments:

Students and tutor speaks out:

The following are reflective diary pieces, which includes my thinking and feelings as well as my student's comment. The class began with my mixed views on veil wearing. Firstly, I stated that wearing or not wearing the veil is an individual right and choice. I then moved on to the more educationally specific issue of whether it was appropriate dress in educational institutions, and whether such dress wear impedes ones' educational experience.

The discussion began with an invitation to the whole class to speak. Interestingly, the first student to speak was a white student, saying: *I don't mind what people wear, it's their business, but….* and there was a silence, seconds after the silence, she makes the following comment with reference to the school teaching assistant Aisha Azmi (appendix 1).

> *I don't see why in a primary school where children need to see their teachers face she had to wear the veil.*

A Muslim student stepped in and said

> *Well, she does not,* she *would lift the veil, at primary age Muslim women are allowed to show their face to young(male)children. She would only wear the veil outside the class and on journey's from home to school;*

The white student responded with the following comment:

> *I don't know about that, but didn't she go for her interview without wearing the veil?*

There was an embarrassing muttering going on by some students, saying they were not sure that A Azmi did go for her interview without the veil. One student said that Muslims do interpret Islam differently, and that Azmi, may have chosen to be more traditional after she had started her Job. Her arguments were that Islam was not homogeneous, and people lived Islam differently, as said below:

> *Hey look, there's us here (*referring to a group of Muslim women*) right, some of us do not cover our heads at all, some wear a hijab, (head scarf) and she (referring to the full veil wearing student) due to her own interpretation of Islam, has chosen to wear the full veil. I don't see what business it is to any of us how we dress.*

This was an important learning moment for this class, obvious, as it may have sounded; the majority white and the non-Muslim students were now exposed to the different Muslim dress codes. Unlike the homogenous view so often found in the popular texts and newspapers, the class was now told by this Muslim student that Islam as with many religions was interpreted and practiced in many ways.

The second non-Muslim student to speak was a mixed heritage student who shared the following:

> *"yeah but why, I'm catholic and the only time I have worn a scar, is when I visited a catholic church in Europe out of respect, anyway we had to. You're not in a religious place now; so why do you wear one, she sniggered.*

This comment was met with a long drawn out silence; the majority white students looked uncomfortable, whilst the minority Muslim students began to appear agitated and looked at each other in disapproval. It was not so much what was said in the above quote, but the dismissal and mockery in her voice that seemed to agitate the other students.

This was an uncomfortable moment for me, as the tutor I remember thinking I must wait for a challenge from the class, when this was not forthcoming, I thought, should I let this pass or should I intervene with a comment, I decided to step in and made the following comment:

> *"surely this is their freedom of choice, why should it matter to others, if they wear the veil, freedom of dress whether of wearing a mini skirt or a hijaab should be a universal freedom, - one should be free to dress as one pleases, so long as we are all free to do so".*

This comment seemed to be met with support from the class. On reflection, I see the importance of the tutor interjection. The tutors voice is often needed to neutralize and indeed to throw in another perspective, this is not to say that *we are the all-knowing* but to say that there is a need to steer the debate so political connections are made. I argue that we should try to stretch the debate beyond the classroom themes and emotions, so that wider socio-political issues regarding anti-racism are raised. Student voice here is important, albeit a commonsense reaction, it allows for the not so formulated ideas to surface, in this case it was white and mixed heritage student who spoke, it allows for counter voices, as with the Muslim women who interrupted the dominant stereotypical views. Student engagement can be difficult, but I argue necessary, if we are to encourage that much needed critical student voice to appear as seen in the following comment from a Muslim female student:

> *I don't understand what the fuss is about; the media just hypes it up. It is (wearing the veil) a human right, and as for the health and safety argument, isn't a tie just as dangerous in class. Pupils have been known to strangle each other with it and they could dangle (the tie) over the fire burner in the science labs.*

This class ended with a mixture of approval and discomfort to the above comment. I felt the tension in this seminar session. Non-the less I believe that the *race talks* need to be aired, if we want to explore and expose the often-confused views that exists in students' minds. These were important moments for all the students. This exchange offered other ways of knowing, non-Muslim students were able to question, clarify and indeed challenge some of these ideas. For the Muslim students, these were important empowering moments as it allowed for the correcting of some of the stereotypical views.

Reflecting on this critical moment, I am able to work out the learning outcomes of this class exchange. The first point to note here is that these discussions develop organically. We like the tide in the sea have little control of the direction of the waves. So, we often react spontaneously. My guide is my respect for the aforementioned concepts of diversity, equality and anti-racism. My job is to steer the debate to a more positive outcome. This as seen above is not easy. The question here is - how do we make best use of the student dialogue? Here I make use of Figueroa's

(1999) concepts of '*situational'* and *educationa*l tasks, to show how this can be done. Figueroa suggests that we open up spaces in the class for students to challenge the common-sense views as they arise. A *situational* task argues Figueroa (1999), can be corrected and directed to form a positive experience which becomes an *educational* task, as said here (a)..

> '*situational'* task is about dealing with realities, as they arise in class,…
> "*an educational ' task .. help(s) individuals and groups to develop the relevant knowledge, understanding, values, affects, skills, habits and patterns of behavior … 'situational' and 'educational' task*…(together leads to)*'correcting faults, making good deficiencies, combating errors'…., or it may be one of promoting positive interaction. (:287)*

In the following I develop Figueroa's matrix to make sense of some of the above comments from the student narratives.

	Situational	***Educational***
Resource using clip from the sun Newspaper	Dealing with misconception as they arise in class	Connections between the Sun News paper article with wider socio-cultural issues, policies, and the politics of freedom of expression and dress wear.
Negative(thesis)	A white student said: *"I don't know why in a primary school … she had to wear a veil?*	Discussion of human rights cases, Race Relations Acts, equal opportunity policies.
Corrective(antithesis) Counter-hegemonic narrative	A Muslim student replied: *Well, she does not, she would lift the veil, at primary school, Muslim women are allowed to show their face to young.. (male pupils before puberty)*	Dismantling ethnocentrism, ethicist thinking and stereotypes, in this case with particular attention to Islamophobia.
Positive Re-constructive (synthesis*)*	Utilizing diverse cultural resources, including student experience from class, school and community.	Using educational sources from feminist, anti-racist and critical pedagogy literature to form alternative arguments/views. (e.g. article by J Zine)

The matrix above is a useful method for directing student (*situational*) dialogue from class discussion towards broader societal anti-racist (*educational*) thinking. The aim here is to elevate the discussions so the wider socio-political connections are made with the 'situational' contributions that emerge form class. In this, my aim is to promote positive growth. Making use of 'situational'/educational and corrective/positive dimensions as shown above has enabled me to turn the situational dialogue moment into a positive educational critique. Such teaching strategy, which is inclusive of the student voice, I argue here, can be the vehicle that promotes a multicultural and anti-racist teaching and learning experience.

This paper argues that despite the difficulty that *the race talk* brings to class debate, student's comments are important and they can become the material for the *anti-racism*. I am not suggesting that all we do is to expose student authentic experiences as the only voice for educational input. What I am suggesting is that we can make use of student experiences as *one* of the tools that explores the political and sociological content of the race debate. Anti-racism involves more than simply recording and re-counting stories and counter stories in the classroom. Introducing counter narratives into the classroom opens the class to other ways of knowing and living racism – through such student interrogation the class discussions can become the challenge to the racism that may arise from the classroom dialogue. Such *interruptions* I ague, can lead to the challenges that may lead in a small way, to the path to bigger transformations.

The student voice that critiques mainstream thinking is a starting point for this political work. On a small micro scale these classroom exchanges can be the moment for changed thinking and who knows, that on a larger scale these exchanges become the awakening of bigger political thinking that connects the world of the class to the outside world. Critical race pedagogy and feminist theory, as said above, has the potential for directing learners to this end. D Gillborn (1996) insists that

> " there is a great deal to be gained by a dynamic understanding of how antiracists and critical race theorists have approached certain issues and dilemmas. Both share a concern not merely to document but to change; they are engaged in praxis. (" p258)

CONCLUSION

As teachers, we should make use of classroom dialogue, I argue that students' self-formation is linked to these discussions in the classroom. By recognizing student voice as legitimate experiences of racism, we open the space for student dialogue that can provide a starting point for anti-racism. My goal is to teach in ways that engages students and leads to student reflection of the socio-economic political /religious issues that surrounds theirs (our) lives. My aim is to create moments in the classroom that opens out the space for such counter (hegemonic) narratives. Making use of classroom dialogue can become the trigger for these exchanges. In conclusion, I argue that the classroom where critical race exchanges and dialogues takes place, is the classroom where students and teachers can be transformed into active participants, creating, changing and re-creating their narratives as they progress. In my view, good anti-racist teaching must draw from the common-sense topics of our classroom talks and conversations, students experience of their socio-political world becomes our teaching plan for our classroom material.

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Ms Azmi is appealing against the dismissal of her claims
Ms Azmi's reaction

A Muslim classroom assistant suspended by a school for wearing a veil in lessons has lost her claim of religious discrimination at a tribunal.

Aishah Azmi, 23, was asked to remove the veil after the Church of England school in Dewsbury, West Yorks, said pupils found it hard to understand her.

The tribunal dismissed her claims of religious discrimination and harassment on religious grounds.

But Kirklees Council was ordered to pay her £1,100 for victimising her.

Mrs Azmi, a married mother-of-one, said she would be appealing against the decision to dismiss her religious discrimination claims.

In a statement she criticised ministers who had intervened in the case and said it made her "fearful of the consequences for Muslim women in this country who want to work".

She said: "However, I am pleased that the tribunal have recognised the victimising way in which the school and the local education authority have handled this matter and the distress that has caused me."

Muslim women who wear the veils are not aliens
Aishah Azmi

The case attracted comments from the prime minister, who backed Kirklees Council for suspending Mrs Azmi.

Tony Blair said the wearing of a full face veil was a "mark of separation" and made some "outside the community feel uncomfortable".

The government's race minister, Phil Woolas, demanded Mrs Azmi to be sacked, accusing her of "denying the right of children to a full education".

Mrs Azmi, who is originally from Cardiff, said: "Muslim women who wear the veils are not aliens, and politicians need to recognise that what they say can have a very dangerous impact on the lives of the minorities they treat as outcasts.

"I will continue to uphold my religious beliefs and urge Muslims to engage in dialogue with the wider community, despite the attacks that are being made upon them."

Headfield Church of England Junior School, which has 546 pupils, suspended Mrs Azmi because it said pupils found it hard to understand her during lessons.

Kirklees Council said the decision was taken after a monitoring period in which the impact of wearing the veil on the teaching and learning was studied.

It said: "In this case the school and local authority had to balance the rights of the children to receive the best quality education possible and Mrs Azmi's desire to express her cultural beliefs by wearing a veil in class.

"The education of the children is of paramount importance and it is disappointing that the school was unable to reach a compromise with Mrs Azmi in this case."

Story from BBC NEWS:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/england/bradford/6066726.stm
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