

Critical Literacy through the Eyes of a White Teacher

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Literacy has taken on a new perspective in the twenty-first century. It is no longer about the spoken word or written text, but goes far beyond this realm to include an acceptance of other's ethnicity, race, and culture. Known as Critical Literacy, it enables people to view a situation or text through a social justice perspective; an avenue to open lines of cultural communication which may otherwise remain silent. In doing so, students and teachers alike understand and learn to respect others' underlying cultural beliefs and attitudes while giving individuals the opportunity to challenge the norm and simultaneously deepen an understanding of differing cultures.

Cultural change is an on-going process which takes time and patience. Deep-rooted scars and cultural expectations from previous generations can be carried forward, at times unknowingly, into present day society. Research shows that children as young as three years of age (Derman-Sparks et al., n.a.) begin to develop racial thoughts, and can negatively influence their perceptions of others, unless altered in some way. In light of breaking these cultural barriers, how effective are schools in altering this racial cycle, especially if a teacher of a multicultural classroom is from a white background?

Society generally views schools as an effective forum for social change. Teachers are therefore encouraged, through the Ministry of Education's initiatives, to create inclusive environments where all children have opportunities to celebrate their unique cultural identities. As a white teacher in a multicultural classroom, I have familiarized myself with research on the various cultural domains of literacy. In doing so, I feel better prepared to synthesize my own learning and growth of critical literacy while helping my students reach their full potential through a lens of cultural acceptance.

At times, my whiteness appears to define me as privileged compared to other cultures, although I do not feel this way. If privileged means that I have never been racially discriminated against, then yes, I would agree thus far that I have been fortunate to avoid any racial tension. However, through reading articles and discussions of Critical Literacy in my MEd classes, I have had my eyes opened to past events promoting current day racism, even towards my own white culture. By bringing this awareness to my attention, I am more in tune with the trials and tribulations other ethnic backgrounds have endured over the last century, such as Native American Indians and African Americans.

I was perplexed by the depth at which racism has scarred Native American Indians; so deeply in fact, that some Aboriginal families felt the need to assimilate with the white culture in the past in order to have their children 'fit in' with a society other than their own. As a result, First Nations Languages and traditions at times became obsolete as children moved off the reserves and into residential schools (St. Denis, 2007). Nowadays however, Native American Indians appear more concerned with maintaining their culture, and appear to flourish in the First Nations School, which teaches through a cultural perspective (Toronto District School Board,

2011). This school was first established in 1977, and later acknowledged by the Toronto District School Board in 1983.

Similarly, African American parents also want to keep their heritage and culture alive while knowing their children are treated as equals with other students within the school system. However, challenges still exist. Dr. George Dei, an influential African American Professor, stated that students from his culture continue to dropout as a result of poor levels of motivation, low teacher expectations, poor socio-economic backgrounds, limited respect for authority figures, and disinterest in the community (Anderson, 2009).

The Toronto Afrocentric Alternative School offers an African perspective to the Ontario curriculum. The outcomes were two-fold with an improved student interest in the educational content, which was presented through a cultural perspective, and an increased opportunity to learn more about their culture. The evidence was promising with a marked improvement in EQAO scores (Anderson, 2009).

While learning through a familiar cultural perspective, students have the opportunity to make an emotional connection with the curriculum content; a learning which may not normally take place through a traditional style of teaching. Park (1995) describes emotional literacy as opportunities which “shape us, inspire us and limit us. It is a skill that enables people to properly construe the signals they receive from other people and to understand the forces that impel them to act in particular ways” (p. 25).

However, not all students have the opportunity to learn through a segregated school system. With this idea in mind, how do white educators in the regular stream nurture and build a respect in young children to help them understand any racial traumas from their past?

According to Mosley and Roger (2006), ethnicity, race and culture can be brought into an elementary classroom through picture books and open discussions about specific past incidences. The intent is to help young children understand previous racial issues then positively form open-minded opinions to encourage culturally sensitive students. By creating a safety zone of acceptance in the classroom, teachers will be opening opportunities for students to be more at ease, and in turn increase their academic achievement.

According to Parker, “good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (1998, p. 13). Culturally speaking, identity refers to a person’s biological and environmental influences, whereas integrity relates to a feeling of wholeness through a process of being true to oneself. Considering both facets, effective white teachers in a multicultural classroom would therefore benefit from an awareness of their own cultural background and biases before authentically appreciating and celebrating the various cultures of their students (Lindsey & Terrel, 2009). Patience is necessary since this process may be time consuming and requires on-going reflection.

While synthesizing my own culture of ‘whiteness’, I have come to realize that my privileged lifestyle is one which I have always accepted as my norm. It was only after I began looking inward at my own biases and views of being white, through the cultures of others, that I was

able to transfer from mind to heart a realization of the depth and breadth of racial discrimination from our past and present day societies. By clearing my ethnic glasses, I am now able to see new cultures through an informed understanding of past hurts and present concerns; such as Native American Indian children in Canadian residential schools, and the desire to improve EQAO results of African American students. In doing so, I have attained a greater appreciation and awareness of reaching all students within my classroom.

In my experience, I have learned that listening and understanding students' cultural and individual needs are vital in helping all students. During the process, I have gained an inside view of various students' values and belief systems; a true understanding of what is important to each person's well-being. This understanding can be a springboard to fulfilling all students' needs and helping them reach their full academic, social, and emotional potentials. For example, looking at Canadian history from a Native American's perspective rather than that of the English and French explorers, or learning the math concept of patterning through a study of African prints rather than creating their own pattern with pattern blocks. In doing so, an awareness of students' cultures is formed while for others, different ethnic backgrounds are introduced and appreciated.

In today's society, diversity is the essence of an effective classroom. Cultural awareness is a choice and a benefit for both teachers and students alike. To reach this enlightenment, white teachers are encouraged to start from within, and recognize any biases which may already exist. In doing so, an opportunity presents itself to change any existing cultural perceptions and sensitivities which teachers may have towards not only their students' needs, but their own inhibitors as educators. This is particularly true for teachers from a white background, who may not be aware of generations of hurt or present day trials and tribulations which students from other cultures have endured.

Differentiated learning through a cultural perspective provides an opportunity for students of various ethnic backgrounds to flourish in an accepting, culturally-sensitive environment. By learning through the eyes of their ancestors, students will have an emotional connection and stronger ownership for their learning. In turn, an appreciation for not only their cultural values and beliefs is developed, but also for those of other ethnicities too. In fact, segregated schools may eventually be a need of the past with the implementation of culturally differentiated teaching approaches.

By synthesizing my own culture, I am left with an inquiry of how to define the social construct of 'whiteness'. What does it really mean? Is it defined solely by skin colour or are ethnicity and culture involved? This is an area for future research. For now, 'white' teachers from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds would benefit from looking within to fully appreciate and understand all students' academic, social, and emotional needs.

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