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Deconstructing Black History Month: Three African American Boys' Exploration of Identity

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Every February, schools celebrate Black History Month and teachers teach the grand narrative of famous African Americans such as Martin Luther King, Jr. While the stories communicate bravery, they are also about racism and violence. Here, through narrative inquiry, a teacher deconstructs Black History Month, inviting student responses to stories she shares.

Introduction

Every February, in schools across the United States, posters of Martin Luther King, Jr., Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, and Frederick Douglass populate walls and bulletin boards. Every February, in honor of Black History Month, teachers read books about famous African Americans to their students, recall the words, "I have a dream," and fulfill their responsibility to give a nod of recognition to the historic contributions of African Americans. Yet, as teachers follow their scripted lessons, how often do they stop to ask their students for their reactions? Do they invite children to talk about the hatred and violence that permeate stories about slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the Civil Rights Movement? If so, what do these teachers hear?

Bachelard (1994) describes school as one of the "sites of our intimate lives" (p. 8), where children learn about the world and learn about themselves. Given the hidden nature of intimacy, we teachers cannot always be certain about what our children secretly think as they learn and develop. In particular, White teachers looking in on Black children from a distant outside gaze will never know what they think and feel. White teachers cannot understand the experience of being a Black child in a White school—until they begin to ask. Without a deliberate effort to uncover their thoughts, Black children remain trapped in a "silenced dialogue" (Delpit, 1995, p. 23), listening to the meta-narrative of African American history without an invitation to join the conversation. This study presents the findings of one White teacher who did ask questions, probing the minds and hearts of three African American boys as they explored their identities while learning about well-known African Americans.

My study began as I worked in a public school in a predominantly White, upper-middle-class neighborhood, in which there were only a handful of African American children and only one African American teacher. At the time of this study, the school was only 5% African American, 8% Latino, the remainder being comprised of White and Asian (primarily Japanese and Korean) students. Each classroom in the school reflected the damning account of the increasing segregation in American public schools (Orfield & Lee, 2007).

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As a reading teacher, I worked in a small room next door to a 1st grade classroom, supporting individual 1st graders who were struggling readers. On one occasion, while working with a 1st grader named Shawn, I saw that he had stopped reading. "Why did you stop reading, Shawn?" I asked. "You know that word." "Yeah, it's 'upset'," he replied. "My teacher is always upset with me. She wishes I were dead."

I worked with Shawn three times a week. On each occasion, I would pick him up from his class, in which he

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was the only African American child, and speak with his teacher for a moment. When I entered the classroom, Mrs. Rose would say, "Take him—he's not doing anything anyway," or "He's all yours," or "He's driving me crazy today." In those moments, the words of Ginott (1997) rang true: "As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt, or heal" (p. 15).

With these words in mind, I wondered if I was witnessing a teacher who simply did not like a small boy, or whether I was witnessing an expression of racism. Did Mrs. Rose's open dismay with Shawn stem from his blackness, from his African American vernacular English or from his active, demanding behavior? Did Mrs. Rose resent having to accommodate Shawn's learning style and behavior in a classroom of compliant, upper-middle-class White and Asian children? Perhaps she was exemplifying Allport's (1954) theory that stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination occur due to an "out group homogeneity effect," whereby all members of an out group are viewed as the same. Perhaps her lack of experience with African American children in a predominantly White school was predisposing her to intolerance.

Background

Researchers suggest that the legacy of racism present throughout American society adds to the likelihood that some White teachers either will be affected by racism or will feel some discomfort with children of color (Howard, 2003). The same researchers have also suggested that clear racial divisions mark which children are benefiting from school and which children are not. With African American students lagging behind White students in reading, math, science, and social studies, and with an overrepresentation of Black students in special education programs, it is clear who is suffering persistent school failure and not benefiting from the public school system that claims to be educating them.

Irvine (2003) discusses the phenomenon of White teachers displaying punitive and intolerant behavior toward African American students. She explains that schools continue to honor one particular code of conduct, while admonishing students who behave according to a different mode of behavior.

I was conscious of this tension as I worked with Shawn, and I remained conscious of the work of Lisa Delpit (1995) who, in *Other People's Children,* discusses common school experiences for African American children in what she calls "alienating environments." I soon became aware of the enormous divide existing between the few African American students and the school's teachers and administrators. Rather than engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy or critical reflection (Howard, 2003; Ladson–Billings, 1995), teachers imposed only one set of values and one style of teaching strategies. Children were expected to sit at desks until they were given permission to move, they were expected to walk through the halls silently, with their hands behind their backs, and they were not permitted to talk without being "called on" by the teacher. Rather than using the cultures, experiences, and perspectives of African American students "as filters through which to teach them academic knowledge and skills" (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 181), teachers delivered the same curriculum, from year to year, with little recognition of children's needs or interests.

Black History Month

Any recognition of diversity occurred in the context of a steadfast White midldle-class culture. When February arrived, with the prescribed unit called Black History Month, this school, like so many other schools across the country, presented historical accounts in a shallow, time-limited manner, teaching children about token African Americans who were supposed to represent African American identity in general. Sleeter and Grant (2003) name such curricular additions "tourist curriculum" and believe that this approach could perpetuate an attitude of "otherness" toward the group which they are celebrating. During the same month, year after year, we taught students the grand narrative—the well-known stories accepted as *the* truth about African Americans—stories about Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Ruby Bridges. We taught about these one-dimensional heroes, like icons of perfection, who stood up to injustice, danger, and aggression.

Yet, with Shawn in mind, I wondered about the ways in which African American children assimilated these stories and other lessons into their own developing identities. I wondered if they were able to listen to the stories and not feel afraid, angry, and attacked themselves given the color of their skin. I thought about the possibility that when we read these stories within a White-dominated school culture, we ran the risk of causing African American children to feel like "the other," to feel that they, too, were a target. Were we naming their identities for them, noting their blackness and, therefore, setting them apart in the minds of their White peers?

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Gay and Kirkland (2003, p. 181) call for "deconstructing and then reconstructing" major U.S. symbols and celebrations. I began to do the same around Black History Month. As we made token efforts to honor diversity, I wondered whether the lessons taught were always the lessons learned. During Black History Month, we may wish to convey the message that Martin Luther King, Jr. was great and brave and that he helped propel the civil rights movement, but perhaps children also learn that it is dangerous to be a Black man who speaks out. We may want to teach our children that Ruby Bridges was a brave girl who contributed to integrating American schools, but perhaps our students learn that some White people do not endorse integration. What might our children think and feel when they realize that mothers and fathers screamed at and taunted six-year-old Ruby Bridges as federal marshals escorted her into her school? With these questions in mind, I sought to explore how I could create the space for Black children in a White school the opportunity to forge their own identities through critical reflection and critical literacy, in a context that seemed to be doing the same for them. In doing so, I examined how children learn to read and interpret text through a lens of social justice and social transformation (Vasquez, 2009).

Consequently, after I presented them with children's literature that described African American history, I then invited them to react with questions, thoughts, and feelings. Their personal connections regarding identity and their visceral reponses to the stories became the blueprint for their understanding of race and the role that race plays in their lives.

Turning to the Words of Three Boys: Shawn, Tyler, and Christopher

The following year, with Shawn in my 2nd grade class, I continued to wonder how he perceived his own blackness. With a history of harsh criticisms, was he, like Toni Morrison's tragic character Pecola, learning self-loathing, as Morrison so magnificently articulates: "The damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze."? (Morrison, 1970, p. 210)

What did Shawn learn about himself and his identity in a predominantly White school? How would he respond to conversations about slavery, discrimination, and racism? Would they stir up secret memories and experiences from the time when he felt that he was a target of his teacher's intolerance? If so, could I give time and space for him to deal with those memories?

During that school year, I began to explore answers to my questions.Through the personal accounts of all my students, including my three African American 2nd grade children—Shawn, Tyler, and Christopher—I began to find out about their awareness of race and the ways in which they constructed their identities. As they learned about African American history, they shared their experiences and their developing identities with me through writing, drawing, and conversation.

As 2nd graders, Shawn, Tyler, and Christopher were eight years old at the time of this study. I examined their expression of identity as individual children, and by examining their individual explorations of identity, I avoided the risk of categorizing them. As van Manen (2003) explains, "Categorical essentialism is dangerous because it sees things in absolute terms and derives moral convictions from fixed principles" (p. xvi). Similarly, studying the multiple and fluid dimensions of identity, Fisher, Jackson, and Villarruel (1998) describe how identity development occurs and changes as children interact with family, peers, and members of various social groups. They write:

> The salience of these different aspects of ethnicity to the individual may change at different points in development and across different contexts. Thus, we need to consider the meaning of race and ethnicity at the individual level. Consideration of the meaning of ethnicity to individuals . . . can challenge the utility of defining race simply in terms of physical characteristics; the validity of equating race and ethnicity, and the assumption that ethnicity contributes to individual development in the same manner for all . . . (p. 1158)

Orellana and Bowman (2003) argue that teachers should view race, ethnicity, culture, and social class, as multifaceted, situated, and socially constructed. Culturally relevant pedagogy theorists warn against applying a rigid set of cultural characteristics to any group, suggesting that teachers focus on differences that exist within groups (Howard, 2003). Thus, as I probe developing perceptions of race among three children, I

focus on a particular time in their development and within a particular school context. While identity invariably shifts and undergoes numerous permutations, I propose that an understanding of our students' sense of identity at any given time fosters a community of trust and offers insight about how best to teach each child.

Methods

While I focused particular attention on the three boys for the purpose of this study, I included all children in the lessons surrounding Black History Month. I began each day with my class by sitting in a circle and giving them time to talk about what was on their minds. It was here that I helped them excavate their thoughts and feelings about the stories I read and where I posed questions about their perceptions of themselves and their classmates. I sought to allow my young students to reflect on the hi*stories* they heard about African Americans and on the personal hi*stories* of each other. I sought to create a space for them to discover their ability to think and read critically, rather than passively accept what they hear without any emotional interaction.

Class meetings generated the data I collected, which fell into three types: drawings about themselves and their friends with an explanation about ways they were the same and ways they were different; responses to the book *Yoko,* by Rosemary Wells (2009), with a focus on how they felt "different" from others; and written responses to the book, *The Story of Ruby Bridges,* by Robert Coles (1995), with an emphasis on how they would have reacted to the vicious crowd that confronted Ruby. Howard (2003) states that pedagogical practices must have relevance and meaning to children's social and cultural realities. By inviting children to offer a personal response to these stories, I sought to restructure the otherwise hegemonic nature of Black History Month, whereby children are expected to react with awe in a uniform manner. Instead, I asked students to read critically and to create their own meanings.

How are you the Same? How are you Different?

On the first occasion, I asked the children to think about the ways they and their friends are the same and ways that they are different and I asked them to keep their ideas to themselves. Shawn's drawing conveyed a keen awareness of race. To accompany his drawing, he wrote "This is me. I am the same as Tyler. We are both Black. I am different from Aaron. I am Black and he is White." Christopher, however, represented his brown complexion in his drawing, but did not focus on race in his explanation, stating: "This is me. I am the same as Max because we are both Christians. I am different from David because I am Christian and he is Jewish."

At that moment, in the context of a particular lesson, Christopher found religion to be the salient dimension of his identity. At that moment, had another person identified Christopher as Black, the label would not have resonated with the way in which he was labeling himself.

Tyler represented yet another dimension of identity. Rather than identifying his race or his religion, Tyler wrote: "This is me. I am the same as Avery because we are both funny. I am different from David because he is funnier than I am." Like Christopher, while he did not discuss race, Tyler represented different skin colors in his drawing. He drew himself with a brown crayon, and did the same on the picture of Avery. Then, realizing that Avery was not Black, he used a white crayon to attempt to cover up the brown face he had drawn. In the picture of David, he went one step further, and let the white paper represent David's face and body. Race notwithstanding, Tyler also drew each face with a pronounced smile, seeming to emphasize his writing about being funny.

Given the same assignment, each African American boy identified a different aspect of his developing identity. Each one demonstrated the hybrid nature of identity and the flawed nature of a "binary logic of self/Other" (LeCourt, 2004, p. 108). The three boys demonstrated within group variation (Fisher, Jackson, & Villarruel, 1998), challenging the ways in which superficial nods to "African American history" overlook qualitative variations among Black children—among all children—in today's classrooms.

Responding to *Yoko*

On another occasion, I read the picture book, *Yoko,* (Wells, 2009) about a child who is teased at school because of the food that she eats. I then asked the children to engage in critical reflection by thinking about what makes them feel different.When I asked Shawn what makes him feel different he responded: "I feel different because I'm black." "What is that like?" I asked. "It makes me feel happy and sad and cool," he replied. "I feel sad 'cause no-one is like me. And I feel cool 'cause no-one is like me."

Again, Shawn immediately turned to the color of his skin as he thought about his connection to his friends. He is a boy, he was tall, he played basketball, and he learned karate. There were many aspects to his identity that he could have named. Yet, Shawn's keen awareness of his race surfaced immediately. Tatum (2000) explains how identity is socially-constructed:

> The parts of our identity that do capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us. The aspect of identity that is the target of others' attention, and subsequently of our own, often is that which sets us apart as exceptional or "other" in their eyes. (p. 11)

Perhaps it was during Shawn's difficult 1st-grade year with Mrs. Rose, when he experienced her hostility, that he became acutely aware of his race. Maybe it was because Shawn was one of a handful of Black children in the school. Perhaps there were many catalysts, negative and positive experiences alike. Whatever the reasons, of the three boys, Shawn consistently named race as the salient aspect of his identity and, in turn, others in the class shared Shawn's awareness of his race. As I read books about famous African Americans, one child called out, "Shawn is Black, too!" On another occasion, while describing Langston Hughes, Aaron noted, "He looks like Shawn." On a similar occasion, Shawn asked me, "Are you White? You look kinda tan," as he tried to determine my identity in his racialized universe.

For Christopher, however, the color of his skin, again, was not the salient aspect of his identity that made him feel different. While school forms and school personnel consistently categorized Christopher as African American, Christopher called upon another facet of his identity. He wrote:

I feel different 'cause I have glasses.

1. I feel weird cause some people make fun of me.
2. I feel sad cause people think I'm a nerd.
3. I feel shy cause I don't want people to make fun of me.

And, like Christopher, Tyler focused on an aspect of his identity unrelated to race. He wrote:

I felt different from other kids. They bigger than me. (I feel)

1. Sad
2. Mad
3. Jealous.

When asked to identify themselves, both Christopher and Tyler were able to determine who they were at that particular moment in time. In this instance, Christopher was a child who wore glasses and Tyler was a boy who felt small in stature; their race was not at the forefront of their minds.

Responding to *The Story of Ruby Bridges*

After reading aloud *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, I asked all the children in my class to think about a time they were teased, to write what they would have done had they been taunted like Ruby, or make any other connection to the story. I asked for their reactions to passages from the book such as:

> On Ruby's first day, a large crowd of angry white people gathered outside the Frantz Elementary School. The people carried signs that said they didn't want black children in a white school. People called Ruby names; some people wanted to hurt her. The city and state police did not help Ruby . . . The crowd seemed ready to kill her. (Coles, 1995, p. 9)

When asked how he could connect to the story, Tyler explained: "I am brown and she was brown." When I then asked him what that felt like, he engaged in an analysis of his friendships and relationships in terms of his skin color. He explained with deep ambivalence:

> I get lots of friends 'cause I'm brown and because some of my friends are brown. I like to be brown 'cause some of my friends are brown. But I wish I was tan or white because Aaron and Mike and Danny are white and I want to be just like them.

Christopher pulled me aside to tell me his private story, and when his classmate, Anna, joined us, he did not object. As he talked, Anna sat close to him, listening with concentration and concern. Christopher began:

> When I was in preschool, I wanted to go on this jungle gym and this boy said, "Whites only," and pushed me off. Then he started chasing me and I tripped. Then he put me in this place and closed the door and I was almost locked in. In kindergarten, my dad told me not to talk to him. My dad told his parents what happened but they didn't care. So my dad told me some kids' parents teach them wrong.

I asked Christopher about how this experience made him feel. He replied, "It made me feel bad and sad. Just because I'm Black doesn't mean I should be treated differently." With an emphasis on teasing, Christopher turned to race for the first time, given a painful experience that he recalled. Through the articulation of his memory, Christopher was able to express his indignation and his conviction. By sharing his memory, he also evoked the caring and compassion of Anna. Together, they created a space where, as Bachelard (1994) explains "memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening . . . a community of memory and image . . . (p. 5)."

Through both the memory that Christopher shared, and the present moment where two children and their teacher talked about how cruel people can be, Christopher and Anna formed a community of trust. Christopher was able to voice his memory and his ideals, knowing that

his teacher and his friend supported him. Paley (2002) asserts:

> The black child is Every Child. There is no activity useful only for the black child. There is no manner of speaking or unique approach or special environment required only for black children. There are only certain words and actions that cause all of us to cover up, and there are other words and actions that help us reveal ourselves to one another. The challenge in teaching is to find a way of communicating to each child the idea that his or her special quality is understood, is valued, and can be talked about. (p. xx)

Thinking about the way they would have reacted had they been in Ruby's position, Tyler wrote, "I would slap them," and Shawn, expressing a wide range of feelings, wrote:

> I would take wood and hit them. I would run. I would look at them and hope they would leave me alone. I would cry. I would talk to them and ask them to stop bothering me. I would ignore.

The words of a little boy painted a rainbow of feelings. He felt enough anger to want to hit a person with a piece of wood, he felt so much fear that he wanted to run and cry, and, at the same time, he felt the courage and hope that if he looked into the faces of cruelty, he would be spared.

Discussion

Looking back on these classroom conversations and explorations of identity during Black History Month, I offer suggestions for teachers who wish to invite children to identify and name themselves. Using children's literature as a springboard for discussions, I began to hear a choir of many voices singing together. Chants of decency and compassion for Ruby and Rosa and Harriet and Martin rang out as I read to them. The children insisted:

"That's so mean!"
"That's not fair!"
"How could they do that?"

As they called out, they offered a rich demonstration of Darling–Hammond's (2005) criteria for "teaching diverse learners effectively" (p. 12), stating: "Teachers need to know how to listen carefully to students and look at their work as well as to structure situations in which students write and talk about their experiences and what they understand." (p. 8)

Little by little, feelings of alienation among the children seemed to subside. Little by little, all children learned that the heroes of past days were great human beings, and that they, too, can be decent and kind. They learned to say, "That's not fair!" not only for themselves, but also for each other. Children's literature can serve as the conduit for honest conversations to occur, and I encourage teachers to delve into the myriad of children's books and create the space for those conversations to emerge.

Reading books to children and allowing them to talk and reflect present powerful opportunities to have conversations about hatred, about the pain each of us has felt, and about ways we all can work for social justice, for caring, for intolerance of discrimination.

In addition to using children's literature, teachers can create environments where children work together and have opportunities to collaborate. By doing so, children will likely develop trusting and cooperative relationships.

Collins (2000) explains, "Sharing a common cause assists individuals and groups in maintaining relationships that transcend their differences. Building effective coalitions involves struggling to hear one another and developing empathy for each other's points of view" (p. 460).

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The books and the conversations teach children the South African concept of *Ubuntu.* As the Xhosa proverb says: *Ubuntu ingamntu ngabanye abantu:* People are people through other people. Ubuntu is the quality of being human. It is sharing, charitableness, and cooperation. It is this quality which distinguishes a human being.

What are we asking our young Black students to do during Black History Month about the struggles of their ancestors? We seem to be asking them gracefully and serenely to accept the past as fact, knowing that there is nothing they can do to deny the suffering of earlier days, while simultaneously feeling a sense of pride in their heritage. Yet, how are African American children able to separate themselves from the categorical identities of people they read about if we do not invite them to talk, think, and explore their own lives and formulate their

own identities? Bachelard (1994) writes about the two dimensional tension between "what is hidden and what is manifest":

> A creature that hides and 'withdraws into its shell' is preparing 'a way out.' This is true of the entire scale of metaphors, from the resurrection of a man in his grave, to the sudden outburst of one who has long been silent. (p. 111)

What, then, occurs when children explore their own identities and the identities of each other? What is the nature of their "outburst"? Teachers must be sure to give them the opportunity to talk about their identities and to create an environment of *ubuntu,* so that children can determine what kind of person they want to be, so that we all can begin the real work to fight alienation, segregation, and discrimination.

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