

Chapter 14

Making Room for Race in Your Classroom Discourse: A Journey of Identity and Homecoming

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter explores how the author made room for discussions about race in their high school English Language Arts classroom and how the author's teaching became emotionally responsive as the author embarked upon an identity journey. The classroom discussions were the result of the author's students' lived experiences being reflected in the course readings and then a space being provided to unpack their meanings. The author's journey began with their early years in education and experiencing integration of Native Americans and White students in school. The author's identity journey embodied walking in two worlds but not being accepted in either; the author is both White and Native American. The author looks White but is an enrolled Northern Cheyenne woman. The author began her teaching career on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation as a long-term math substitute teacher at a high school. It was at this school that the author had many experiences unpacking race and learning how to implement emotionally responsive pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

As educators, it is important that we become comfortable with ourselves in order to be authentic with our students. This is especially true because of a primarily White teaching force across the country is building relationships with an expanding population of students of color. One critical aspect of the journey to becoming an educator for me was to deepen my understanding of race in America and American schools as an ongoing process. As an early career professional, I wasn't equipped with the tools necessary to understand and unpack the implications of race in my classroom. It was my students that taught me to value their lived experiences and provide spaces for conversations about race. According to Milner (2015), "we've really got to disrupt and confront the attempts to not address issues of race, racism, and

other forms of discrimination on a micro level as well as a macro level” (n.p.). In my classroom, I continue to disrupt and confront racism and other forms of discrimination on multiple levels by engaging in courageous conversations about everything (Dahle-Huff, Stutelberg, & Bulatowicz, 2019; Singleton, 2014). Much of my journey has centralized on self-reflection and coming to terms with my own racial identity. I am still on this journey.

As teachers, it is important that we unpack our own racial identities and become comfortable with ourselves if we are going to engage students in courageous conversations about difficult topics such as racism and privilege (Singleton, 2014). The effort to understand our own racial identities speaks directly to disrupting and confronting these particular issues in schools. Lewis Ketter, & Fabos’ study highlighted rural teachers’ discussions about multicultural young adult literature which, in turn, enabled them to consider race. In the first phase of their study the teachers and the researchers themselves found they were , “sustaining particular norms of whiteness even as we [they] attempted to disrupt these norms” (p.318). This study evidences how complicated the intersectionality is between race and identity. Further, similar research has shown that White teachers often do not like to talk about whiteness and prefer to leave race out of classroom conversations (Michael, 2015). But teaching is always political and the omission of race from teaching sends a powerful, if unintentional, message to our students. As Garrett and Segall (2013) assert,

Much of the literature still highlights the fact that teachers – especially white teachers – tend to avoid discussing race and, in the rare occasions they do, minimize its importance and relevance in education and the larger societal discourses that give rise and meaning to educational practices. (p. 265)

It is imperative that conversations about race happen in our classrooms and the first step that teachers need to take to facilitate these conversations is to own their racial identity. The intersectionality of race and identity can be difficult for teachers, but we must be willing to unpack our meanings of these constructs in order to honor the lived experiences of our students.

BACKGROUND: WALKING IN TWO WORLDS

I am an enrolled member of the Northern Cheyenne tribe. This has always been difficult for me to share because I look White, not Native American. I am always uncomfortable when any form asks me to identify my race; it feels like a choice I have to make each time. Am I White? Am I Native American? Both?

My own understanding of the intersectionality of race and identity began as a student. I am from the Northern Cheyenne Reservation; however, I attended school off the reservation. My school’s community was a border town, quite literally bordering the reservation. I believe it was because of this border town condition that the community had two elementary schools, one for out-of-town kids and one for in-town kids, or to explain further, one for Native Americans and one for Whites. My fifth-grade year we integrated. It was a time of inner turmoil; this happened in the 1990s. Our norm had been two schools and the systems change was confusing; at the time I did not understand what I was experiencing. Even later, when I learned about the Civil Rights movement and Brown vs. the Board of Education, the connection between the term *integration* and what I had experienced was not clear. I had lived through integration but wasn’t able to make much sense of it because I saw it through the eyes of a child. The border town

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