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SED 552

January 30, 2010

The Blindness of Society and Myself

The issues of racism in today's society have decreased dramatically over the course of the last sixty years. However, to say that racism, segregation, and bias are nonexistent would be a total disregard for the hardships felt by many members of society. School systems have worked to integrate classrooms and level the playing field but there is still the constant struggle with tracking and misplacement of students based on their image and behavior. While these are issues that we as educators struggle to rectify, the fight to truly rid the field of education of biasness and racism is a constant fight, one that I am passionate about winning.

To some people it is difficult for them to understand my viewpoints on the importance of cultural diversity in the world and especially within the classroom. I have lived in Newport my entire life and am so grateful for my experiences growing up and always being surrounded by a diverse crowd. To many people, Newport is a magical place of mansions, fantastic beaches and an affluent boating community, however that is a façade that the City by the Sea hides behind. On Aquidneck Island, Newport is actually considered to be the "ghetto" by its' neighboring towns. The fact of the matter is that Newport has four low-income housing projects that are hidden behind walls and placed on the outskirts of town. The high school's graduation rate is dismal and teen pregnancy is finally coming down from an all time high in the past few years. There are no rich and

famous children roaming the halls of the high school, or students who are flaunting their money in the parking lot with amazing cars. We have an urban ring school district that is struggling to make ends meet and increase test scores as well as the graduation rate.

Due to my experiences in childhood, adolescence and adulthood, I view myself as a person who is open-minded, fair and willing to stand up for a cause that I feel passionate about. Upon taking the "Race Test" for this class, I was appalled and outraged that I was told to have a "moderate preference to European Americans." I found the test to be a complete fraud based on the conditioning of the mind and hands. It reminded me of Pavlov's phenomenon of Classical Conditioning, where based on a stimulus or constant pattern, people would become "conditioned" in the habit of responding in a certain way. For example, how Pavlov used a bell in order to simulate the time of eating, the dog would begin to salivate even if there was not any food in sight. I found my mind resorting back to the initial key options for "good" and "bad," as well as "European American" and "African American." It was frustrating and annoying that the negative and positive words were even placed under the same column as a race in general as the test continued, creating a distinct difference between two races. Yes, it is obvious that there are visually physical differences between African Americans and European Americans, but the placement of words under a race was disheartening and obnoxious.

After completing the "Race Test" I found myself unable and uninterested in reading Allan Johnson's "Privilege, Power, and Difference" article. I needed some time and space to allow myself to process the absurdity of the test. Overall, I found the article to be redundant and at times felt Johnson to be arrogant and flaunting his New England, middle class, heterosexual self, all the while trying to convince an audience that he knows

Do the students really we. assigned to explain this at all?

ironically, of course, Johnson would say about the white people...
about the white people...
about the white people...

issues concerning race, gender, and sexual orientation play a role in his success. I do have to applaud him for discussing some very poignant matters such as beating around the bush and avoiding certain terms and phrases in conversations with people of a different race. Johnson's statement "... we have to reclaim these lost and discredited words so that we can use them to name and make sense of the truth of what's going on" (13) resonates with my own thoughts. If we avoid the actual words, then we are ultimately avoiding the situation itself and are not prepared to rectify the matter. Uncomfortable conversations have to be had in order to gain ground in any problem or situation. 1954's Brown vs. Board of Education posed to be a difficult conversation but the Supreme Court's ruling has benefited classrooms and schools immensely by bringing in different thoughts and opinions as well as personal experiences when reading and connecting with literature.

sort of -
except that
we are more
segregated
today than we
were in 1954.

There are many benefits to integration but to claim there are no faults in the education system, especially in Newport, would be an outrageous lie, along with the assertion that each class is heterogeneous. I have often posed the difficult question to my students about why there is such a division of their peers within their classes. I look to see if the students even notice that there are certain people missing from their classes and that they are constantly with the same people day in and day out. I find they do not notice as long as they are with their friends or people they are comfortable with, they do not care. I however, struggle with the homogeneous grouping that takes place. When I walk into a classroom that is a sea of Caucasian faces at the beginning of the year, I have difficulty learning names and differentiating between the girl with the blonde highlights to the girl with even blonder highlights. I secretly dread these classes because they are filled with friends and social groups that normally agree with whatever their peers are saying and

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avoid "rocking the boat." Perhaps that is my true hidden bias; I enjoy a culturally, heterogeneously mixed, College Prep class over the mainly homogeneously, stagnant Honors class. I would rather work ten times harder and longer at encouraging and pushing a motley crew of students towards writing a semi-decent paper of analysis, than fine tuning a group of Honors students. The truth of the matter is, the College Prep students teach me, and sometimes more than I teach them. More often than not, they make me take risks in lesson plans and go further outside of my comfort zone than I want at times.

The concept of nothing can be gained if a risk is not taken, is relevant to Johnson's belief that, "We are not prisoners to some natural order that puts us hopelessly and endlessly against one another. We are prisoners to something, but it's closer to our own making than we realize" (4). Throughout this reflection, I am coming to terms that I have set up my own prison of dread by not embracing my Honors students as much as my College Prep kids. If I allow myself to continue to place barriers between my Honors students and myself, I will not be providing them with the most authentic methods of teaching as I would like or that they deserve. I must first have the difficult and uncomfortable conversation with myself about putting aside my disdain for the homogeneous classroom. I cannot control the system put in place in my school currently. Instead, I must embrace and understand the students I have in front of me and push them further in their expressions of the literature at hand.

Johnson's article and the "Race Test," are insightful in different ways. The absurdity of the test playing mind games forced me to second-guess myself to see if I actually did prefer my general race above another for a few seconds before the frustration

what does it mean to you?

good

of an exercise came into play. I had to force myself to process the purpose of the test before I was able to read and digest the content of the required article, which provided further insight yet frustration. Johnson's ideas are thought provoking and do place poignant facts on the table that are often overlooked by society, myself included. I do not necessarily see myself as "privileged" as Johnson, however he has made me more conscious of my surroundings and interactions with my students. I clearly have some areas for growth and the process will be difficult to overcome some of the barriers that I myself have created in my own world and career.