



CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LITERACY

Through Student Narratives

By Rosa Nam

Half of all five-year-olds in the country belong to a racial or ethnic minority, yet white kids continue to hold center stage in most children's books and young-adult fiction. As a result, large numbers of kids don't see themselves reflected in the books they read, and non-white, or non-heterosexual, or even non-male children end up learning that they are marginal, or secondary, in their society.

Abstract: With the increasing racial tensions and violence over race in America, it is now more pertinent than ever for educators to model good citizenry to students and encourage acceptance and celebration of multiculturalism in America. This article provides a basic framework in moving toward equitable education through understanding of a historical context surrounding racism and then reviews a culturally responsive literary strategy involving authenticating student voice through narrative creative writing.

Keywords: diversity, racism, narratives, multiculturalism, literacy

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I entered teaching as a Korean American female who grew up in poverty in a Title I school district in Houston, Texas. Consequently, my desire to teach stemmed from personal experience of escaping poverty through education. I started teaching through the alternative certification route and did not have any training in culturally responsive teaching, critical pedagogy, or honestly any actual pedagogy. My training consisted of a week of watching inspirational education-related videos in a high school auditorium. Thus, I created my own sort of social justice using my background, my knowledge from undergraduate studies as an ethnic studies major, and my basic teaching skills to build a culturally responsive classroom. I combined the three areas in my literature choices and themes for my units to encourage understanding of our diverse, and often flawed America as a high school English teacher in an underserved district.

This is what all relatively culturally competent educators try to do. We understand that disparities exist among students of different races without maybe fully understanding why, and we try to help all students be successful. With all the grading, meetings, and administrative expectations we have, understanding critical race theory and developing ways to reach all your diverse learners are nearly impossible and unrealistic. This is even harder if, like me, teachers have not had formal training in culturally responsive teaching. The following research provides a basic framework in moving toward equitable education by providing historical context surrounding racism along with a review of a culturally responsive literary strategy involving authenticating student voice through narrative creative writing.

A Brief Introduction to Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is a framework and “tool” used to analyze and deconstruct stereotypes in society surrounding people of color. The following are brief summaries of a few tenets of critical race theory that can help provide an overview to understand the intricate history of race in America necessary to help people see in color.

Race Is Not Real

Bryant, Moss, and Boudreau (2015) explain that race is rooted in skin color, physique, and hair texture between groups of individuals that has nothing to do with aptitude or moral behavior. One cannot determine a person’s race based on a blood test. One race is not inherently superior to another. The Public Broadcasting System (2003) documentary titled “Race: The Power of An Illusion” explains race through an anthropological lens emphasizing how hereditary traits can be more present in one race or another, but people of one race do not consistently possess one biological trait that another race does not have. Rather, race is a fluid social construct that is invented, changed, and manipulated when convenient. Bryant, Moss, and Boudreau (2015) explain how dominant white society racializes populations per its needs. At one point, a race may be depicted as innocent and harmless to whites. “A little later, when conditions change, that very same group may appear in cartoons, movies, and other cultural scripts as menacing, brutish, and out of control, requiring close monitoring in repression” (p. 4).

Racism Is Very Real

Racism is very real both in daily life and at an institutional level. The United States has historically discriminated against races through legislation, for example, The Indian Removal Act, The Chinese Exclusion Act, The Japanese American Internment, and Anti-Miscegenation laws. This does not include de facto racism like housing discrimination prohibiting Black World War II veterans from obtaining housing loans (Mette, Nieuwenhuizen, & Hvidston 2016).

Racism has spread deep roots in education as well. During Reconstruction, predominately African American schools were vandalized and teachers were lynched. After *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), African American schools were closed and African American teachers displaced (Harmon 2012). Decades after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, public education remains unequal. White students are disproportionately segregated into gifted and talented programs while students in special education programs and emotional and behavioral programs are overwhelmingly Black. Further, schools that serve immigrant children and students of color are historically understaffed and underfinanced (Jost, Whitfield, & Jost, 2005).

Many opponents of affirmative action lament how the initiative provides an advantage to students of color. What they do not

understand, however, is that students of color and whites did not have the same start. Jost, Whitfield, and Jost (2015), in “When the Rules Are Fair, But the Game Isn’t,” explain the unfair advantage of white success in American during a highly successful teacher professional development using the game Monopoly. Essentially, the teachers play a routine game of Monopoly with one modification: separate start times. The first pair play for seven rounds followed by group two for five more rounds. Then group three joins. The results of the game are consistent: The first group always wins. The subsequent groups rarely build assets equal to those of the first group. Some groups even choose to stay in jail to prevent paying for landing on other’s property. Late starting groups lose motivation to continue to play the game.

The exercise provided a sobering realization for teachers about racism and the inequities among races in the wide society, specifically for students of color. It helped explain how the achievement gap could widen during children’s time in school depending on social factors outside of school that were no fault of their own and rather the failure of a system built by and for whites who had a head start.

White Children’s Books

Teachers, then, are in ultimate positions of power and can be great agents of empowerment or oppression. Thomson-Bunn (2014) argues how education is a political process. We, the district, and the state, determine what knowledge is of significance, what the students must know. Our pedagogy arises out of ideology. As literacy educators, a large portion of our teachings come from the texts we select. As a nation, our books are still very white. Nancy Larrick’s famous 1965 article, “The All-White World of Children’s Books” explains her survey of more than 5,000 children’s books and how only 349, or 6.7% included one or more Black people. Not much has changed. In a 2012 study conducted by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, of 3,600 children’s books, 3% were about African Americans, 2% about Asians and Pacific Americans, less than 2% about Latinos, and less than 1% about Native Americans (Perez, 2012). This is a problem. Noah Berlatsky (2004) notes in *The Atlantic*:

Half of all five-year-olds in the country belong to a racial or ethnic minority, yet white kids continue to hold center stage in most children’s books and young-adult fiction. As a result, large numbers of kids don’t see themselves reflected in the books they read, and non-white, or non-heterosexual, or even non-male children end up learning that they are marginal, or secondary, in their society.

According to Larrick (1965), “the white child learns from his books that he is the kingfish. There seems little chance of developing the humility so urgently needed for the world cooperation, instead of world conflict, as long as our children are brought up on gentle doses of racism through their books” (p. 63).

In truth, many publishers do not see multicultural books as profitable. A majority of publishing houses still have predominately

white staff. Further, often teachers do not have the knowledge to recommend diverse books for their students.

Culturally Responsive Literacy Through Creative Writing

Teachers cannot remedy the racism of traditional publishing houses, but we can teach and recommend diverse books for our students. Teachers can use the hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks through various social media sites and visit the website WeNeedDiverseBooks.org for lists of diverse titles. Another transformative resource is tapping into the rich experiences and backgrounds of students themselves by encouraging student narratives. Writer Junot Díaz in his essay “POC vs. MFA” criticizes his experience in the Master of Fine Arts program at Cornell University and the complete lack of diversity among the faculty, students, and writing. He explains, “Simply put: I was a person of color in a workshop whose theory of reality did not include my most fundamental experiences as a person of color—that did not in other words include me” (Díaz, 2014).

Unlike the white-washed and heteronormative professors that fortunately did not stifle Díaz’s creativity, secondary ELA teachers can use our knowledge of critical race theory to empower and encourage our students to discover their voices. In education, we are constantly assessing mastery. In ELA classrooms, students write one expository and persuasive after another, but we rarely encourage students to write their own stories. What better way to measure whether a student understands plot and symbolism than to write a story with a clear plot and symbolism? Students can write stories about characters who look like them and are from their neighborhoods. They can write what they know, what Richard Wright refers to as their own descriptions of reality, and have their experiences validated by their teachers.

Though traditional literature has been slow to change and accurately reflect our diverse population, one area of popular interest that is winning this fight is superheroes. Marvel has been leading the effort by casting actors of all races for major superhero roles in movies and showcasing a new line of comic heroes (Calia, 2015). The new comic Hulk is a Korean American teenager. The new Spiderman is a bi-racial Black and Hispanic teen. The new comic Thor is a woman. Seeing someone who looks like you as a superhero can be incredibly powerful, especially if you have never seen yourself reflected in any form of literature before.

Encourage students to write their own narratives and share them with the class. Show them that their stories are not secondary and are just as important. Creative writing is related to our standards. In fact, writing or creating is the highest skill on Bloom’s taxonomy. Instead of assigning elementary students summaries about a story they read, have them write adaptations using people they know and their neighborhoods as a backdrop. Consider adapting *Romeo and Juliet* into a short story and be open to the possibility of bi-racial and gay couples. Modernize *Pride and Prejudice* and recreate scenes using the mall or other areas around the city as the setting and make the stories relatable to students.

Setting students loose with their own writing can be daunting. Creative writing can be unexpected and stirring. But we must consider what David Mura (2016) believes to be a fundamental truth:

If we live in a village—and most white Americans live in an all white village—we think everyone thinks like us; we think our truth is the only truth; we think the way we see ourselves is the only way to see ourselves. But if a stranger walks into your village, or if you ... walk into a village of strangers, you are suddenly aware that there are other ways of looking at the world, at the ways you identify yourself. (p. 14)

Many of our students of color believe, or are taught to believe that the white village is the place to be. Many teachers live in an all-white village, go to work, and come right back. It is time for us to be voyagers and explore each other’s villages. We must discover other ways of looking at the world, for that is our goal and duty as educators.



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