Personal Perspective

Color-Blindness vs. Race Matters:
Pre-School Education and the Need for a Communal Vision

By Christina Judith Hein

Race Matters

When she received the Academy Award for Best Actress on March 24, 2002, African American actress Halle Berry found herself unable to speak calmly for minutes as she was shaken with tears. "Tonight, a window has been opened," she stated as she saw herself receiving the Oscar for "every nameless woman of color" who had been denied the privileges and honors of a white-dominated society. She is the first African American actress to have received the award in its 76-year history.

If race did not matter, if color made no difference, as is reassuringly repeated ever so often in the different public, political, and academic discourses of the day, what would account for Berry's excitement and the standing ovations that followed her speech?

The Myth of Color-Blindness

I discern two trends ruling with many of the teachers, intellectuals, and citizens of the United States. One is the color-blind-myth that Williams (1997) cites in her essay, "The Emperor's New Clothes": "I don't think about color, therefore your problems don't exist," is the phrase that she attributes to this "school of idealism" (p.4).

The other is the notion of race as a social construct. Race is not inscribed in a gene, and therefore it is not natural but the product of human communal perception. What many half-hearted constructionists seem to forget over this valuable approach,

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however, is that thinking cannot stop there. Race matters exactly *because* it is socially constructed.

But how can the attempts at color-blindness be reconciled, in a socio-political reality, with the understanding that here and now race *is* an influential factor? In the following, I will interrogate the tension that arises between these two perceptions. I will try to position my voice in the interstitial spaces between commonly-accepted concepts and binaries and come up with an alternative perspective.

People Are Different

Real color-blindness, I would argue, is something that will not be achieved. For one thing, race is so much more than just the color of a person's skin. Race intersects with ethnicity, with culture, with histories. It cannot be the aim, I believe, to strive for complete annihilation of these valuable differences that testify to the beautiful and rich diversity of human life.

It cannot be the aim either to work towards a future where every individual is treated *the same*, regardless of their race, ethnicity, class, sex, gender, ability, age. People are different and the different layers of their identities ask for different kinds of responses in a social framework with certain norms and values.[1]

Nobody, in my vision of a global future, should be made to feel bad because of who they are. Nor should they be privileged or denied respect. Opportunities, where they are institutionalized and regulated, should be equally accessible and discourses that stereotypically invest members of a certain racial group with certain characteristics need to be dismantled and reshaped.

It will not be possible, however, by means of any kind of education or any kind of social or political system to prevent indi-

vidual people from disliking, hating, abusing, or otherwise mistreating others. Humans remain humans with all their frailties and delusions, and this needs to be accepted as a basis for the creation of any usable vision for the future.

Is Color-Blindness Futile?

Is the color-blind-approach, with its different avatars in the contexts of teaching and education as well as in the general public sphere, completely futile, then? While Williams acknowledges that it is certainly "well-meaning" (p.1), I would like to take a step further and also value the basic assumptions that I can see shimmer through.

The task of forming society, of shaping the face of the world, in a gradual process of giving up and taking on power and responsibilities, is bestowed upon the children. If teachers, parents, and the better part of their environment succeed in making them appreciate the values of tolerance, respect, and love, socio-political conditions that many of us are still dreading today might become obsolete and eventually dissolve in their hands.

Teaching, however, still needs to be grounded in the realities of the day; it needs to be culturally responsive.[2] Cultures are complex, and they do not only comprise positive elements. They have histories of war, conflict, repression, and a responsible teacher has to take these elements into account, too.

In this regard, I agree with Williams's assessment: "Race matters are resented and repressed in much the same way as matters of sex and scandal," she observes (p.8). Even further, the 'blindness' towards issues of race and a related muted helplessness to address them reveal structural similarities to the general conduct in a family affected by the dark secret of child abuse.

The tacit, oftentimes unconscious agreement is to ignore the crime, to act as though nothing had happened; clearly, this inability to speak up openly and talk prevents all members involved from amending the wrongs and healing the wounds.

Can African American People Play 'Good Guys'?

The mere fact that this question can be an issue with and even instigate a fight among kindergarteners reveals enough about a society that is anything but color-blind. Hushing down any discussion and communication about race issues and further promoting the myth of color-blindness will hardly contribute to the formation of more educated and understanding statements about race and diversity — and yet, Williams observes exactly this response from her son's nursery school teachers in an incident she relates (p.3). A culturally sensitive response would have suggested taking different measures; and there is plenty of space in the design of a nursery school curriculum, I assume, to engage this conflict creatively.[3]

A first step should be to find out why individual children believe that African American people cannot play 'good guys.' Is it because of the kinds of TV programs they have been exposed to? Is it because of the kinds of ideas that circulate in their homes? Is it because of the children's books that they know?

It is more than likely that the opinions of a kindergartener reflect the views of his or her parents, siblings, and other influential relatives. A teacher would expect too much of herself, I believe, if she wanted to isolate a child ideologically from this familial environment and take on the task of implementing him or her with diametrically opposed ideas.

Rather, issues of racism need to be addressed at parents' meetings and patterns of behavior need to be pointed out to the families. To instigate positive changes, observations and critique should be combined with discussion and the introduction of educational strategies trained at changing these patterns. If the issue seems very sensitive or the teacher does not know the family, she might choose to contact them personally.

The following days at nursery school should emphasize education on 'black heroship.' Picture books with African American protagonists should be made available along with African American dolls and action figures. Songs and games should be aimed at incorporating an African American perspective. Children might be encouraged to color the people in their paintings — rather than just leaving their faces a presumably 'un-racialized' white or standard pink.

Teachers should take care at this stage not to expect too much of the children; nor should they throw in all that has been missed out in terms of multicultural education at once. Too much input might lead to confusion and subsequent resistance and refusal. Likewise, too much emphasis on 'blackness' (or alternatively any other minority group) after a period of complete silence might create awkward situations for the non-white children in the group.

Issues of race are difficult enough for adults to grasp. Children might fail to get the point if it is pressed too much and feel that the non-white children suddenly receive special treatment and attention while they themselves are being neglected or even punished. In this case, misunderstandings about race might end up being fuelled with negative feelings and future racism might find a well-prepared basis to take root and grow. Teachers should listen and watch closely and be able to react sensibly and sensitively to any frustrations and confusions.

Ideally, teachers and parents would be able to learn from incidents such as the one sketched out by Williams. It cannot be enough, once the need for a more efficient multicultural education has been highlighted, to portray the world as structured on a binary of black and white.[4] In the following weeks and months, representatives — not stereotypes! — of other ethnic groups need to find their ways into the world of the nursery school. Again, I would suggest picture books, dolls and action figures, games and songs.[5] The walls should feature images and photographs of children of different racial and mixedblood backgrounds. If possible, the school or kindergarten should encourage non-white interns to work and play with the children.[6]

Stimulating Exchange and Conversation

While a circumferential discourse about race is being kindled within academia, while individual groups and people raise their voices to make persisting shortcomings and injustices known and to alleviate them, there is still an overall lack of open, honest, and meaningful exchange between the racial groups in the United States.[7] Williams talks about a "silence that is passed from parent to child" and about "the forbidden gaze" (pp.8-9) that would turn any racial difference imperceptible.

The people that have come to share the geographical and cultural spaces of what is today the United States, ever since the (un)fortunate stranding of the Admiral of the Ocean Sea in 1492, have been unable to construct an acceptable concept of community. Parading as the World Democracy, as the role model for the rest of the conflict-stricken world, a number of meaning-makers choose to promote the voices, views, and circumstances of life of only a part of society. The clever employment of rhetorical and other strategic means succeeds to a degree in hiding those who are not able or willing to go in conformity with this concocted picture.

It is a challenge for every single person in the United States to live in the extraordinary situation that the history of the country has brought about, where cultures meet and clash, intersect and mix, and change. What this nation needs in order to mature and to become whole, in my perspective, is a serious and open dialogue.

Rather than shouting meanings into the world, those in positions of power would need to facilitate and engage in communication with representatives of the different groups that constitute the United States of America. Half-forgotten and buried events of the past have to be acknowledged and amended as well as possible. Self-critical reflection and reassessment has to take place.

On a basis of uneducated self-complacency, members of the dominant, 'white' society tend to consider themselves as a human norm. 'Whiteness' remains racially indistinct, while everybody else is coded as other, different, 'ethnic.'[8] "Ours must be a world in which we know each other better," Williams argues (p.5). Before this can happen, however, it needs to be a nation in which everybody knows themselves better — through the eyes of those who they are sharing the resources of the country with, that is.[9]

It needs be the ultimate goal of these painful processes of reassessment, debate, and compromise to come to a communal vision for the United States. Oppression has never been embraced communally, neither have assimilation or segregation. What, then, are the alternatives? What should be the guise of the United States?

At present, all that teachers can do in this society is to work towards the alleviation of past wrongs and the effects that they still induce into human interaction today. They can engage into opening up spaces and

minds for unprejudiced communication and exchange.[10]

Their hands are bound, however, when it comes to preparing future citizens for a state that would hold equality as dearly as the contentment of its different groups. The national intercultural future of the United States is hidden in a mist of injustices, harsh feelings, and misunderstandings, and without a constructive communal vision, the ultimate goal of culturally responsive education needs remain vague and blurred.

Notes

[1] Civil Rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr. called for the equal treatment of all people regardless of their distinctive characteristics. Rhetorically and within the framework of a struggle for agency, this dream is powerful and valuable. Interpersonal contact, however, always requires reacting to a person's individual needs, desires, hurts, etc.

[2] According to Cornel Pewewardy (1998), culturally responsive pedagogy "involves providing the best possible education for children that preserves their own cultural heritage and prepares them for meaningful relationships with other people, and for living productive lives in the present society without sacrificing their own cultural perspective" (pp.69-70).

[3] Pulido-Tobiassen & Gonzalez-Mena (1999) emphasize the importance of culturally responsive education for preschoolers: "Because young children form ideas about themselves and other people long before they start kindergarten, it is important to begin teaching anti-bias lessons early. If we reinforce these lessons, children will learn to appreciate, rather than fear, differences and to recognize bias and stereotypes when they see them" (p.3).

[4] Williams does take care to include members of other racial and ethnic backgrounds into her discussion. Her main focus, however, remains with the old bi-nary of black versus white. Clearly, education and communication need to improve drastically until those who live in the United States become able to appropriately see and appreciate the cultural diversities and complexities of their nation and the opportunities inherent in them.

[5] Not just any book, doll, game or song will do! Teachers need to take special care at choosing appropriate materials. Playing cowboys and Indians or a little African doll in a straw skirt are clearly not the options that I am talking about.

[6] Financial restrictions might of course impede the acquisition of new articles. Resorting to appropriate games and songs and having the children paint their own pictures of culturally and racially diverse, positive identification figures are inexpensive and available options.

[7] Parsons & Brown (2001) rigorously engage issues of diversity in teacher education. In their inspiring article they come to a sober self-assessment: "Students and faculty talk about diversity, write about diversity, read about diversity, [… Diversity is part of our discourse]. What does not happen […] is the development of an understanding of the depth or breadth of the issue of diversity. […] We discuss diversity clinically, sharing statistics and generalizations, but we often fail to make difference personal, to build with our students a bridge to empathy and action" (p.1).

[8] bell hooks, in her essay "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination" (1992), observes that "white students respond with disbelief, shock, and rage, as they listen to black students talk about whiteness, when they are compelled to hear observations, stereotypes, etc. […]. Usually, white students respond with naive amazement that black people critically assess white people from a standpoint where 'whiteness' is the privileged signifier" (p.167).

[9] Lee & Johnson (2000) understand the importance of critical self-assessment in a diverse society. Referring to J. Banks they state: "one of the goals of multicultural education is to help individuals gain greater self-understanding *by viewing themselves from the perspectives of others*" [my italics] (p.28).

[10] Williams's article reflects this need. She finds a space to make her voice heard, she observes, and she criticizes. Yet she is unable, as she points out herself, to clearly envision the society that she would like to live in. Her call for an optimistic course, important as it is, finds itself somewhat stifled by her lack of vision (p.16).

Acknowledgement

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