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Amina Mohamed

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PRACTICE

Voicing the Voiceless: Including the Stories of Marginalized Students in Classroom Literature

AMINA MOHAMED

Finding the I in Identity

The school district I work in is often referred to as “diverse”; our students come from over 15 different countries and speak dozens of different languages and dialects in their homes. The word diverse often means different, of course, and lately, I’ve been noticing something different going on. Every day during second recess, instead of dashing outside to play, a number of students choose to come into my classroom. What draws them is the presence of books from various genres and cultures. Because daily curricular demands often don’t leave enough time for them to explore all the books in my classroom library during our small group time, I invited them to come and read during recess. When I first gave them the option, I thought it might only last for about a week before they would succumb to peer pressure and go back to playing outside. The first week, two students came and quietly read during the entire fifteen minutes of recess. The following week, that number went up to seven, and the noise level also increased as first and second grade readers discussed the books they were reading.

As word spread around about my books and more students started coming in, I grew more puzzled as to why students were willingly giving up their

recess to come and read. My question was answered one day when Isabel, a first grader whose family emigrated from Mexico, came sprinting to my desk to show me a book she was reading. She yelled, “Look! This book is in English but it also has Spanish words!” Isabel then went on to show the book to the other recess readers, most of whom were not Hispanic and all of whom were just as surprised as she was to discover that bilingual books exist. This discovery started a domino effect of students teaching each other vocabulary in their native languages. Like a mirror that reflects our images, during that single recess period, my students from various countries and cultures began to see their identities and experiences represented in my classroom literature, which helped to explain why they kept coming in to read every day. This cultural representation allowed my students to bring their background knowledge and experiences to the stories they read as a way of comprehending what they were reading and also of explaining their own cultural background to their classmates.

When the bell rang that day, a student named San—whose parents are refugees from Burma—asked whether I had books about Burma (although it is referred to as Myanmar today, most of my Burmese students reject this change as a way of opposing the military regime responsible for the genocide of their people) before she left. Her question took me back to my childhood, a time

when I asked myself that question with every book I read—Are there books out there with characters who look like me and share similar life experiences? The elementary school I attended was very similar to the one I work in now in terms of student demographics, cultural diversity, and linguistic richness; but like San, I found myself yearning for books in which I could discover myself and people like me.

Never Finding the I in Literature

I was born and raised in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Ethnically, however, I am the child of two expatriates. My mother was born and raised in Uganda during the reign of Idi Amin. Her family later immigrated to Kenya when she was sixteen due to political tensions and the possibility of persecution. My father, on the other hand, was born and raised in Somalia. He moved to the UAE prior to the 1991 Somali Civil War in the hopes of starting a new and better life. His family back in Somalia were not as fortunate, as most of them witnessed the breaking out of war firsthand. Thankfully, my paternal grandfather had close family friends in Kenya who welcomed him and his remaining children into their home as they sought asylum.

To show their gratitude, my paternal grandparents agreed to offer their many sons in marriage to the family that had provided them a safe haven.

Thus, the elders of both families agreed that my father (then living in the UAE) and my mother (then living in Kenya) should marry. Following the wedding, my mother left her East African home of thirteen years to begin her new chapter of life in the UAE, a country she knew nothing about, including the language (Arabic). Perhaps because both of my parents felt so foreign in the UAE, when their children began to be born, they insisted on preserving their individual and collective cultures. Thus, at home, my brothers and I grew up speaking Swahili and a minority dialect of Somali. In addition, in order to thrive in our private schools in the UAE, we also had to learn and be proficient in both English and Arabic.

Although my home culture was doubly and decidedly African and my school Middle- Eastern, every book I read in school was narrated by authors from the United States or England. In fact, all the characters in every book were white. Looking back now, I find this quite ironic since the UAE is an ethnically diverse country; yet I was forced to read strictly homogeneous literature. I was pushed to read these books in school under the pretense of perfecting my own English. Although I eventually perfected my English, I came to realize that the literature I was exposed to in school not only shaped my perception of the world, but it also directly impacted my own identity formation.

The Process of Identity Formation

The process of identity formation is quite challenging to outline and explain. Cross (1991) proposed a theory of racial identity development that is made up of five stages:

1. Pre-encounter: Children of color in this stage begin absorbing messages

from the dominant culture about what it means to be a member of their race.

2. Encounter: This stage happens in early adolescence, when an event or series of events shows how racism directly impacts the lives of children of color.

3. Immersion/Emersion: In this stage, children take time to learn about their history and culture and surround themselves with members from within their own racial group.

4. Internalization: Children leave this stage feeling a sense of security about their racial identity.

5. Internalization-commitment: The sense of security from the internalization stage translates into activism regarding the concerns of one's racial group.

Although at first glance this process might appear to be rather linear (from "pre-encounter" to a final and lasting "commitment"), my experience with racial identity formation indicates that the process can be far from straightforward. According to Cross (1991), children of color gain a sense of security upon learning about their racial history and culture, which then translates into activism. In my own case, however, the highly diverse components of my racial identity have unfortunately not allowed me to gain a sense of security, despite the fact that I thoroughly studied and learned my history and my culture(s) outside of school with friends who shared the same thirst for knowledge. Although this knowledge has motivated me to become an activist (including the writing of this article), I am still left with a lot of confusion and unanswered questions regarding my racial identity. This complication is largely due to the exclusion of voices like mine from the Eurocentric curriculum, a crucial gap that impeded my racial identity development during my formative years.

Within countries like the UAE, Kenya, and Uganda, all former colonies of the British Empire, Europeans make up a small minority of the population. However, the rampant and rapid spread of European influence in colonized societies, including within educational curricula, has resulted in centuries' worth of Eurocentrism, which Tyson (2006) defines as the "belief that European culture is vastly superior to all others" (p.359). The ideology of Eurocentrism was spread via institutionalized discrimination, specifically in African and Middle Eastern countries.

Of course, such discrimination harms various groups to differing degrees: although all the natives of the land were at a disadvantage during colonization, the British granted privilege to some groups, specifically those whose physical characteristics and habits resembled their own. In the Sudan, for instance, Madibbo (2012) states the British provided the Northern Arab (Arabized) elite with more infrastructure and development, in addition to resources like education, communication, and health services. The fact that these Sudanese of Arab descent have lighter skin than the Southern Sudanese of African descent surely explains the differences in resources they received. This differential privilege later allowed Eurocentrism to continue spreading even after the colonial period, but under different perpetrators: natives of previously colonized lands who had been given access to power and resources, including educational resources, based on their cultural backgrounds and their physical characteristics.

Racism in the Curriculum

This is as true of the United States as it was of the UAE of my youth. Schubert

(2010) states that North American curricula have been guilty of practicing exclusion whereby the dominant curriculum is a reflection of the experiences of whites, males, Western Europeans, and Americans (as cited in Brown and Au, 2014, p.359). The exclusion of people of color within the context of education is built on the historical tendency to view them as less than fully human, or in the words of Mills (1998) “subpersons” (as cited in Brown and Au, 2014, p. 363). Over time, several initiatives have been taken to include the narratives of people of color in curricula. However, the number of books depicting their experiences is quite minimal compared to the literature narrated by their white counterparts. Between 1962 and 1964, educator Nancy Larrick examined 5,206 children’s books. Out of all these books, only 6.7 percent of them included one or more black characters and fewer than 1 percent featured contemporary African Americans (Hughes-Hassell, 2013). Unfortunately, this underrepresentation of people of color within education has not significantly improved over time. In 2011, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison received approximately 3,400 books. Out of all these books, only 8.8% were multicultural (Hughes-Hassell, 2013).

In the remainder of this paper, I wish to provide some suggestions for teachers who want all of their students to find themselves in the literature they study in school. I know from personal and painful experience that these statistics are stacked against students of color in the United States; and as a teacher in a highly diverse school, I am determined that my own students will have access to books, stories, and other resources in which they can find themselves, explore and construct their identities, and learn to understand and respect the identities

and cultural backgrounds of those who are quite different from themselves. I recognize that not all teachers have access to the resources necessary for building a highly diverse classroom library (I was fortunate enough to receive a grant to purchase multicultural books); but published books are not the only resources available to teachers in diverse districts.

The following pedagogical suggestions were planned with K-12 classrooms in mind. Although they propose different methods to implement into the curriculum, they all have the same purpose: “to serve as a weapon of resistance against oppression and a tool for creating a transformative culture” (Picher, 2007, p.81).

Storytelling as a Tool for Social Change

I’ve noticed that when many North Americans talk about “exposing kids to stories,” they mean only written stories—and usually only stories written by others. But many of our students come from cultures and families in which story telling is a central and powerful activity. One of the most powerful parts of storytelling is its ability to connect listeners and readers to various experiences that they themselves can relate to. Ganz (2011) states that “when we tell a story, we enable the listener to enter its time and place with us, see what we see, hear what we hear, feel what we feel” (p. 284). As listeners or readers become engaged in stories, they also begin to reflect on their own identities and experiences. The stories children are exposed to should seek to not only positively impact their values, but also empower them to define their identities according to what they see fit. Helping and encouraging students to tell their own stories is a way of ensuring that others, especially cultural outsiders, will not

commandeer their narratives for political or economic gain. In his discussion of storytelling, Ganz (2011) mentions “if we don’t author our story, others will” (p. 284). Unfortunately, as we have seen, marginalized students have had limited access to empowering, culturally relevant personal narratives.

Sometimes, students need to tell stories in response to published stories in order to facilitate their own (and their classmates’) understanding. For example, as a child, I was repeatedly exposed to Disney fairytales without realizing the harmful impacts its Eurocentrism had on my idea of beauty. It took until my third year of college to discover that there are so many versions of these fairytales that include the stories of people of color. With this knowledge, I was determined to be conscious of the fairytale stories I included in my classroom. As a way of exposing my students to various genres of literature, I read aloud to them. One day, I decided to read *Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters*, an African version to the traditional Cinderella story. I read this book with the intention of exposing my students to the idea that there are different versions to the traditional Eurocentric fairytales we see in our books and movies. Although I was excited to see their reaction to the book, I was not prepared for the discussion that transpired in my classroom on that day. The book makes reference to laughing trees and a headless man as a form of symbolism, which I assumed my students would not pay attention to. Unfortunately, there were remarks made about the references being weird and creepy by some students. Upon hearing this, Jean immediately jumped to his feet to explain that the author was not literally talking about headless men and laughing trees but was rather referring to spirits, a common theme found in many African folktales and stories

as a way of conveying life lessons. Jean comes from a West African background, so he was able to quickly understand the references made and explain them to his classmates. Allowing Jean to teach all of us about the function of certain symbols in books rooted in his culture enriched all of us.

In this way, multicultural stories open doors for students to not only feel validated, but also learn from each other. Due to this reason, teachers need to ensure that students are not only exposed to multicultural stories, but are also able to add on to them—just like Jean did in my classroom. Since the personal stories of marginalized students are not a part of the dominant culture, they automatically become counter stories. Counter-storytelling, as defined by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), is “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (as cited in Hughes-Hassell, date, p.214). In pedagogical terms, this involves the inclusion of multicultural stories as a natural part of the classroom curriculum, not the exception.

Choosing Counter Narratives for Classroom Literature

The ability to choose is one of the most empowering feelings. Biancosa and Snow (2006) state “one of the easiest ways to build some choice into the students’ school day is to incorporate independent reading time” (as cited in Morgan and Wagner, 2013, p.660). One purpose of independent reading is to actively engage students in thinking about their identities as they read books that reflect their experiences. Furthermore, the nature of independent reading allows the curriculum to be personalized in a manner that can fit the unique identities of all students. This means that students have the autonomy

to pick books that represent their backgrounds. As was the case with my students, children are naturally drawn to stories and books that they can relate to. Even if school districts cannot afford an entire classroom library of highly diverse books, teachers can perhaps be afforded the ability to purchase a few, representative books as a way of beginning.

By reading books that pertain to their personal identity, marginalized students will be able to gain insight into “the complexity of racial and ethnic identity formation” (Hughes-Hassell, 2013, p.215). Through the characters



from *Uncle Jed's Barbershop*

of their chosen books, students can reflect on their personal experiences in comparison to the book, specifically when it comes to marginalization. This acknowledgement that others share similar experiences to theirs can be quite healing for some students, especially once they become more familiar with the historic oppression and victimization of their people (Hughes-Hassell, 2013). This healing can then lead students into thinking critically about their own identities and reshaping the

definition of what it means to belong in that group. The next two sections will give examples of books that deal with the marginalization of people from the African diaspora. As an African, I found various parallels between the experiences of the characters from both books despite the different geographic locations. The description of these books aim to give an introduction to the countless possibilities of available literature that teachers can recommend to marginalized students.

Uncle Jed's Barbershop

Margaret King Mitchell's picture book is set in the southern part of the United States during the 1920's, an era that plagued the country with segregation and financial difficulties. Five year old Sara's Uncle Jed was the only black barber in their part of the country. Although Uncle Jed had to travel a great distance to cut his customer's hair daily, he dreamed of opening his own barber shop one day. Through the eyes of little Sara, readers gain insight on what segregation means and how it affected blacks living in America. For instance, Sara gets severely ill and when they get to the hospital, she and her parents are escorted to the “colored” waiting area. Sara then goes on to explain that this was the norm in her society.

Although Jim Crow laws have been abolished, segregation and racism are still a universal experience for blacks in America. In the book, Sara's family attempt to overcome their oppression through community building and establishing strong relationships within their family and community. Sara concludes the book by saying “he [Uncle Jed] made his dream come true even when nobody else believed in it. He taught me to dream too” (Mitchell, 1998, p.40). Marginalized students reading this text can learn the importance of standing

in solidarity against systems of oppression that put them at a disadvantage. They can also learn to always have hope in continuing to pursue and fight for their dreams, despite the challenges. Unfortunately, hopes and dreams are thematic concepts that are not only absent in multicultural literature, but also in the lives of marginalized students. More importantly, this story can also help students stop blaming themselves for the marginalization they experience by showing them the root causes that has led to their disenfranchisement (Hughes-Hassell, 2013).

Child of Dandelions

Marginalization and oppression of blacks can also be found in the African Diaspora. Authored by Indian born Ugandan Shenaaz Nanji, *Child of Dandelions* explores the after effects of colonialism in Uganda during the reign of Idi Amin. Sabine is a wealthy Indian who is color blind to the racism Ugandans face in their own land. Although she is blinded by her racial privilege, Sabine still keeps an open mind and is friends with Zena, a poor Ugandan. On August 6 1972, Idi Amin made a public announcement demanding that all Indians leave Uganda within ninety days. He believed that Ugandans have been stripped of resources and advantages in their own lands because of the wealthy Indians. To Amin, Indians needed to be weeded out in order for Africans to thrive. Every chapter in the book deals with a certain day from this scary countdown depicting the fear many families faced, the relationships that were broken, and most importantly the overt awareness of racism. The author offers a brief history of Uganda by explaining the effects of colonialism and its impacts post-independence. When the British colonized Uganda, they were the wealthiest, then the Indians were the middle class, and the native Ugandans were of

the working class. After independence, Indians gained access to a majority of the wealth and resources because of the privilege that was granted to them during colonization. This not only continued to make Ugandans poor, but it also increased racial tensions between the two groups.

Although I have not lived in post-colonial African nations, I have experienced its after effects. The colonizers drilled the concept of Eurocentrism, an ideology that has resulted in the colonized to feel internalized oppression even decades after their independence. In the case of Uganda, internalized oppression quickly turned into hatred and anger. My mother's family fleeing Uganda in the 70's was the end of our relationship with the land. Although I am ethnically part Ugandan, the political turmoil that plagued the country during Idi Amin has resulted in my mother and her family to lose that part of their identity. In this process, various stories and relationships were lost. Thankfully, Nanji's novel offers insight into a story that has long been silenced and forgotten.

Journal Writing

In addition to feeding students empowering words through literature and eliciting students own, very powerful stories, teachers should also be giving students the opportunity to reflect on their reading by writing down their thoughts and feelings. This personal approach to writing will give students an opportunity to explore their feelings and views (Yost and Vagel, 2012). Furthermore, they will also have the opportunity to extend their thought processes through reflection and critical thinking.

The primary purpose of this pedagogical approach is to help students

develop their inner voice which, in turn, will help them shape their identities (Yost and Vagel, 2012). Upon completion of the book, students will be asked to respond to three questions: 1) How did the experiences in the book resemble/differ from your own? 2) Did this book empower/disempower you? 3) What did you learn about yourself or your identity through this book? The goal of the first question is to have students make text-to-self connections that allow them to link the book and their personal life. Through this, students can realize that they are not alone and others share similar experiences. By acknowledging this, students can feel empowered to change or alter their reality. The purpose of the second question is for students to think about whether the experiences depicted in the book empower their identities to strive for change or leave them disempowered. Often times, even if books addressing issues of marginalization are filled with sad and disempowering stories, students are still able to look at the characters in the book as models for resilience and persistence against oppression (Yost and Vagel, 2012). Finally, the last question aims to bring the focus back to the student and their identity. Keeping in mind what they have read, students should now think about what takeaways they have gained after reading the book, specifically pertaining to their chosen identity.

As an extension, teachers can also have students engage in dialogue journals as a way of fostering cultural competence and having students learn from each other's experiences. Upon responding to their journal questions, students can pair up with their peers, read their responses, and write down their input in the form of connections they make with their partner's response or questions they have. This can help students learn about cultures different than their

own and also respect them. Instead of viewing differences in cultures as deficiencies, students will gain an appreciation for diversity as they hear different stories from their classmates. However, it is crucial to establish ground rules prior to implementing dialogue journals. This will vary from classroom to classroom but it is important for students to know the expectations and purpose of having these rich dialogues.

Spoken Word Poetry

To culminate this learning experience, students will construct spoken word poetry based on their readings, experiences, and journal reflections. The oral tradition of performing poetry is a practice that can be found in various marginalized communities, specifically within the African Diaspora. Historically speaking, poetry was not only used as a method of self-expression, but also for community building. When poetry is performed, the words connect the performer to the audience as parallels are drawn between various experiences. Within the culture of spoken word there is an importance to not only write down one's experiences, but also share it with a community. The sharing component of spoken word can be an empowering experience for students. It can inspire them to stand in solidarity together against the various forms of oppression they face, despite varying experiences. Additionally, as they vocalize their experiences through their spoken word, students can also feel a sense of ownership of their stories and identities.

For writing, the purpose of constructing spoken word poetry is for students to narrate their identity and dreams to their community. Prior to asking students to write independently, the teacher will give formal instruction about the writing style of spoken word poetry. The number of days it takes for formal instruction will vary depending on students' background knowledge and progress. Lessons will focus on the usage of metaphors, figures of speech, alliteration, assonance, dissonance, rhyme, repetition and parallelism (Camangian, 2008). Students will be given the prompt "who are you?" and "what are your dreams?" The nature of writing in this section of the curriculum involves heavy critical thinking, which is defined as "analyzing the world within political, economic and socio-historical frameworks" (Camangian, 2008, p. 39). Students will be asked to think of how their identity has impacted their life experiences. For high school students particularly, they can be asked to think of the history of their oppression in terms of how institutions of power impact how their identities are perceived, in addition to their lived experiences. Finally, students will be asked to narrate

their hopes and dreams as a method of slowly moving beyond their oppression into a brighter and better future. Students do not only have a powerful voice with their writing, but also a critical one. This means being able to effectively communicate transformative ideas in ways that challenge the thought process of the audience (Camangian, 2008).

The community plays an integral role within the context of spoken word. As a support system, members from within the community can help each other by offering feedback and advice. Bearing this in mind, once students draft a piece of writing they are confident with, the teacher will pair them up with a classmate to practice delivery and presentation. For the narration to be effective, it is imperative that the poet deliver it with appropriate intonations. Additionally, body language is also an important aspect of presentation. So, when students are paired up, they will be practicing speech presentation and body language adjustments. Once students are confident with their work, they will perform it to the entire class.

Conclusion

Identity formation is a continuous process that all individuals go through in their lifetime. The schooling system is an environment that can either hinder or aid identity development. Unfortunately, colonialism, slavery, and other forms of institutionalized racism have affected the curriculum by creating a hegemonic culture of Eurocentrism. This homogeneous curriculum is a result of schools historically being created to serve Europeans. Due to this reason, the content of the curriculum is often merely a reflection of Eurocentric experiences. Although the demographics of schools have diversified over time, the content of the curriculum has remained largely the same. This is problematic for marginalized students, who are only included in the curriculum when it fits the needs of dominant groups. Sadly, this results in the oppression and silencing of their stories and experiences, which eventually leads to them feeling disempowered with their identity. Reading, storytelling, and narration are powerful tools for teachers to implement in the classroom in order to help students explore and define their identities. The stories of marginalized groups are, by default, counter stories since they give voice to people who have historically been oppressed. Through appropriate multicultural literature, students can gain an understanding of their marginalization by reading about the experiences of others who come from similar backgrounds like theirs. Furthermore, the experiences depicted in multicultural literature can inspire students to narrate their own counter stories, which can be beneficial in

helping them gain an understanding of their self and identity as they go through life. It is crucial that the books each child is exposed to directly speak to their background and experiences. For teachers, this means getting to know their students so they are better able to match each child with the right book. Education is meant to serve the needs of students and because of this reason, the curriculum needs to be planned with the diverse identities of students in mind.

Amina Mohamed grew up in the United Arab Emirates and currently works with English Language Learners (ELL) in Kentwood, Michigan. She holds a BA in English Language Arts and Elementary Education from Grand Valley State University and is pursuing a Masters in Literacy Studies.

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