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16. "HEY MISS, WHAT'S AN 'OTHER'?"

Becoming an educator was never a linear path for me. Even to this present day, my journey continues to be filled with circles, zigzags, and the not-so-occasional tangent. Throughout these experiences, the concept of a multicultural education has always chased me—or perhaps I have chased it.

"HEY MISS, WHERE ARE YOU FROM?"

I was born in Canada to immigrant parents from India and China, and by growing up in a large metropolitan city, I have always been surrounded by individuals from a wide range of racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds. These differences were never an issue, and always more of a given fact: an unremarkable part of daily life. My classmates and teachers were first and foremost individuals before they were ever relegated to the colour of their skin, the language they spoke at home, or the country where they were born. Looking back, I still struggle with whether this type of environment was actually desirable.because while growing up exposed to diverse individuals taught me at a young age that differences are to a certain extent 'normal', that diversity always went unexamined. The implications of being a non-white person were never discussed, never explored, and always overlooked during my K-12 public education. As a result, you can imagine my surprise several years later into the future when I stepped back into a school, this time in the role of a teacher, and suddenly found that questions about my ethnicity, culture, nationality, and language simply became routine. By working in the same diverse communities that I had grown up in, I noticed that these questions were always asked by racialized students. These same students were also the ones that would come early to class or hang around afterwards for no other reason than to chat. While I am now certain that my status as a 'visible minority'[1] has shaped the way I have been perceived, treated, and judged my entire life, my race, as well as the race of others, were never salient to me until I became a teacher.

It began with my first teaching placement in a school community primarily composed of immigrant families in a neighbourhood where several public housing units were located: in other words, what is infamously referred to as an 'inner-city' school. I still remember the day on which I received the notice with the name of this school where I would be assistant teaching for one month. My classmates all started to excitedly share their placements with one another, and when I shared mine, I

T. A. Horton & L. Lemisko (Eds.), Educator to Educator, 181–189.

got a few blank stares and one or two scrunched noses. “Oh”, some of them softly replied. Being unfamiliar with the school name, I didn't know what to make of these reactions. A quick search on the Internet immediately led me to a recent news article titled, *The worst school in the city*. I blinked in disbelief as I read about their poor test scores, frequent visits from the police, violent mishaps, low socioeconomic status of the surrounding neighbourhood, and the high numbers ofimmigrant students. I’ll be honest; I wasn’t sure if I could handle it. I felt overwhelmed and scared. I even thought about requesting a change in schools, but knew that the likelihood of being able to switch was virtually non-existent. I remember taking one really deep breath and bracing myself for the worst. What followed, however, has shaped everything about the teacher I am, and continue to become today.

Right off the bat on the first day of my placement, I remember feeling nervous, excited, anxious, and prepared (or so I thought). During first period, a Grade 11 academic English class, an announcement came on to remind all Grade 10 and 11 students to come down to an assembly in the cafeteria at 10:30am. As soon as the P.A. system went off, all the students asked, “*What assembly?*”

My mentor teacher went on to explain that the city councillor was visiting that day to give a congratulatory speech to them.

“*For what?*” they all asked suspiciously.

She explained that their school demonstrated the biggest improvement in scores on the provincial Literacy Test, jumping from a 49% pass rate to 67%. Now when I first learned about this piece of news in the department office that same morning, I was ecstatic! I was happy for the school’s progress and glad that they were being honoured by a city representative; however I had no idea of the surprise that lay in store for me.

Immediately the students retaliated, one by one, to the announcement:

- *67%? Only 67% of us can read and write? That’s not something to be proud of.*
- *If it were any other school, they wouldn’t go visit them. But because it’s us, people think that 67% is amazing because it’s us and we’re stupid so 67% is good for us, but not for most people.*
- *I’m not going to the assembly. I don’t want to listen to some white guy think he’s doing some great act of charity by coming here and talking to us stupid kids.*
- *People always feel sorry for us. Remember that newspaper article? We’re the worst school in the city, you know.*
- *When my friends from other schools find out I’m getting 90s, they say ‘Well that’s because you go to that school, so it doesn’t count.’ And that makes me so angry because I work hard but it doesn’t matter just because I go to a bad school? It isn’t fair.*

As the emotional comments continued to flood the room, I felt my jaw dropping in progressively larger increments. I was in complete disbelief. What was going on? My eyes stung with tears as some of the kids shared some of the obstacles they faced on a daily basis simply due to the fact that they attended this school. I felt guilty for

not only knowing exactly which newspaper article they were referring to, but having given that same article credit just a few days prior, in enabling me to judge a school that I really knew nothing about.

Upon hearing these comments, my mentor teacher did something that the majority of teachers, in my experience, would not have done; she stopped the lesson and pursued the conversation. She asked them why they felt angry and why they thought the school had its reputation. She challenged them to view the situation from another perspective and asked them what actions they could engage in to fight these negative stereotypes. And above everything else, she listened. And in listening, she validated the fact that what her students were feeling was not only real, but that it was also important.

The month that followed consisted of a huge learning curve for me, made up of mistakes, obstacles, second tries, triumphs, and many lessons learned: the biggest of which is the fact that language is powerful. And because it is so powerful, it becomes problematic when terms such as 'good school' and 'bad school' are embedded into dominant discourse. What exactly is a 'bad school'? What do you picture when you hear that phrase? More importantly, who do you envision? Terms such as 'inner-city' and 'at-risk students' are loaded phrases that are often used to mask stereotypes and generalized notions about specific groups. Kids often catch on to a lot more than we give them credit for, and when there are negative connotations surrounding everything that their identities are related to, they internalize these harmful feelings. So the next time you hear someone, be it a colleague, student, or friend, use the terms 'good school' or 'bad school', I invite you to ask them what they really mean. These dialogues are not confrontational and not intended to be tense, but instead constructive and collaborative discussions.

How many times have you, as an educator, heard a student use inappropriate language? Of these times, how often did you stop to talk about what you heard? It's easier to pretend you didn't hear it. Or maybe the lesson was already running late and there just wasn't enough time. Perhaps sending the student straight to the principal's office seemed more appropriate. I get it. Schools and classrooms are not quite like they are portrayed in the movies *Freedom Writers* or *Dangerous Minds*. The realities of day-to-day teaching are not all that glamorous, but they are important.

I remember teaching a Grade 9 French class and facilitating a listening exercise. There was a picture of two kids in their textbook, one White girl and one Black boy, whose conversation they had to listen to and then answer comprehension questions. One minute into playing the recording, I heard one of my students exclaim, "*You know it's not real because the guy doesn't sound Black*." I froze, finding myself in one of those critical moments that I am certain every teacher has found him or herself at one time or another; do you or don't you say something?

I stopped the recording. All eyes turned to me. I addressed the student. "*What did you say?"* The student hesitated, then explained that because the male voice wasn't using slang or bad grammar, the voice actor probably wasn't Black as suggested by the picture in their textbooks. Silence flooded the room. *Do all Black people*

use slang or bad grammar? Do people who are not Black ever use slang or bad grammar?

We spent the remainder of that period debunking students' preconceptions and misconceptions about racial stereotypes. White and non-white students shared their experiences, their stories, and asked questions to me as well as to one another. We busted myths, we defended our feelings, and above all I think what we learned was more valuable than whatever was in the rest of that French audio recording. School is a site of socialization and when it comes down to whether or not I get through my lesson plan in one period versus making sure a student knows what it means to be racist, I believe the life lessons embedded in the latter should always supersede the curricular content of the former. It is one of the main reasons why I will strive to create a taboo-free environment in my classroom. School plays a critical role in preparing our future generations to be good citizens, and teachers play a pivotal role in their development.

"HEY MISS, WHAT'S AN 'OTHER'?"

The quest to teach students about multiculturalism has been fraught with obstacles and criticism. Take for example, the infamous foods and festivals trend, which is a popular strategy used by schools and teachers to address the different cultural backgrounds of its student population by hosting an event where everyone is invited to bring in food, wear clothing, and even showcase artistic talents from their respective cultures and ethnicities. These celebrations have become commonplace in Canadian schools, and they do have their merits in bringing people together to learn about and be exposed to different people and backgrounds. Nevertheless, they have been criticized for being superficial in their efforts to teach lasting and valuable content about multiculturalism.

Where did this concept come from? Why is it of particular importance in Canada? Above all, what obstacles are commonly faced when trying to embrace this notion? These are important questions that a 'Multicultural Day/Night' event may not necessarily be able to adequately explore without added intervention from teachers during class time.

One challenge that I, as a teacher, have encountered with these events is their finiteness: in other words, the fact that they typically only last one day out of an entire school year. I once had a conversation with a colleague who is Hispanic and has naturally long, curly dark hair, which she attributes to her South American background. On the school's Multicultural Day, however, she would wear her hair naturally as opposed to straightened, which was typically the case. She explained to me that she keeps it straight because it softens her impression as a stereotypically unruly and boisterous Latina, but that on Multicultural Day, she feels that it is more acceptable to embrace her natural hair. This seemingly minor and casual conversation resonated with me because it pushed me to question how successful we really are

in being multicultural if people still feel that there is a distinction between when individuals can be who they are and a time when they cannot.

As a teacher, I continue to remain reluctant in designating specific days to concepts such as Black history, women's rights, and of course, multiculturalism. While I completely understand the intent to celebrate and pay homage to certain individuals, historic events, and revolutionary ideas, I am hesitant to package these ideas into boxed days. I worry that these important causes become occasions as opposed to parts of our everyday lives. This sentiment does not imply a lack of support for these events, but it does beg educators to be more critical of what is accomplished through foods and festivals, and how it can be sustained though the other 364 days of the year.

Though I maintain that a multicultural education is something that does not necessarily have to be added on to a teacher's existing workload, I believe that when the opportunity arises, topics such as racism and discrimination should be explicitly addressed. I believe in a taboo-free classroom because it's important to address the topics that are too often steered clear of and met with discomfort. After all, these are the topics that teenagers need the most guidance with.

In my first year of teaching, I remember trying out an out-of-the-box activity with my Grade 12 'Individuals and Society' class. A chapter on Cultural Conflicts signalled the perfect opportunity to highlight key issues relating to multiculturalism. When my students starting arriving that period, I asked them to help me push the desks off to the side until there was nothing left but a slew of scattered chairs in the middle of the room. As the number of puzzled faces came through the doors and the bell rang, I told my students that they would not need their books or pencils today (Cue a handful of cheers). I told them the topic of today's lesson was 'Cultural Conflicts' and asked them what came to mind when they heard this title.

War.
Hate.
Racism.
What is racism? A moment of silence.

Students discussed how it's when you don't like or you make assumptions about someone based on appearances. I wanted more from them, so I asked them what racism took into account—did you look at whether they were wearing brand name clothing, or if they had tattoos or piercings? Students shook their heads. One offered that you judged them based on their background. I told them that my background is that I was born and raised in Toronto, but is that something people would assume by just looking at me? Again, students shook their heads. Another student suggested that it was a person's culture that formed the basis for acts of racism.

"*What exactly is culture?"* We talked about how language, traditions, religion, food, values, beliefs, and clothing are all parts of one's culture. How many of these elements are things you can know by simply looking at someone? Sure, they could be wearing an item of clothing or a symbol indicative of their culture, but not always.

A Jewish student talked about how he doesn't wear a kippah. A Christian student pulled out the cross on her necklace. A Sikh student looked up at his turban. Culture is a network of elements and is not always tangible or visible.

I emphasized the word, *racism*, and asked them again, what is it based on? Eventually, I heard murmurs whispering, *"race"*. I exclaimed, *"Exactly!"*

But why was that so hard to say? As a class, we discussed how race can be simplified to the colour of a person's skin, and that it was proven long ago that it doesn't have any biological grounding, meaning that a person from China could share 99% of the same genetic material as a person from Brazil. Subsequently racial classifications such as white, black, brown, yellow, red, and so forth, are now recognized as being social constructs as opposed to biological ones. In order words, these are social categories that humans made up to label one another. We examined how the lack of scientific evidence for race was critical in dismantling the increasingly popular belief that certain traits could be generalized to entire groups of people. I asked students for some examples listed below:

Muslim people are terrorists.
Black people are criminals.
Asian people are bad drivers.
Aboriginal people are alcoholics.
Brown people smell bad.

As each of these stereotypes was volunteered and written up on the blackboard, the classroom stirred with sounds of recognition, a few uncomfortable giggles, finally followed by silence. At this point I asked students to stand up. I explained that in the four corners of the room, I had placed signs with labels: white, black, Asian, Middle Eastern, and in the middle of the classroom, 'other'. I asked students to go to the part of the room that they felt most identified who they are. This instruction was purposefully vague and open to interpretation. A few minutes later, students had settled down. I asked them to look around and to share any reactions or feelings.

Immediately a student standing in the corner wanted to know why one of his friends had chosen to stand against the wall in between the 'black' and 'Asian' corners. I asked the student if he wanted to share; he explained that even though he knows that the colour of his skin is black, his hobbies all consisted of what would be considered stereotypically Asian: computer games, watching anime cartoons, and eating Chinese food. I told him those were great reasons for choosing to stand there. "*Anyone else?"*

The only student standing in the middle of the room chimed in. He had pulled the sign reading 'other' up off the floor and held in up in his hands, asking, *"Hey Miss, what's an 'other'?"*

I told the class that the categories around the room were not random. I had taken them from a survey that was recently administered to local school communities. Several students nodded, mentioning that it is a popular question that is asked at the beginning of a lot of forms and surveys. This answer, however, did not satisfy

this student, who wanted to know why most groups were named while, he, who identified as a Latino, had to settle on being categorized under the label, 'other'. We talked about the possibility of these questionnaires being tailored to the populations where they were distributed and our thoughts on why this information was even requested, and how it would be used.

My Grade 12 students talked about how they had to answer this question on some of their university/college applications and how this made them feel uneasy. *Why?* Students talked about how their grades and their accomplishments should be the only things considered, and that the rest is irrelevant. A student standing in the 'white' corner piped up and agreed. He talked about how he's lucky to stand where he is because white people don't face any racism, except, he says, when it comes to those identification questions on applications where he feels like they always want 'diversity'. On one hand, white students felt like this question worked against themand on the other hand, non-white students didn't want to be selected because of their skin colour. In both cases, this question was unanimously disliked.

I asked students to think of the most powerful people in Canada: the CEOs, the politicians, the philanthropists. We live in one of most 'multicultural' countries in the world, but would you know it by looking at our leaders? *"Is it simply a coincidence that most of these people are white?"*

We talked about the smaller number of qualified non-white individuals, but that led into a conversation about how certain qualifications and education are not equally accessible by all. We examined factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, and English as a first, second, or third language. We explored the possibility of family businesses and empire inheritances, in addition to other explanations on why there weren't as many non-white individuals in positions of power.

Another student spoke up, *"Hey Miss, maybe it's because white people don't have to deal with any of that,"* as she gestured to the stereotypes on the blackboard. The bell rang. No one moved.

I thanked my students for their participation in class, and wanted to leave them with some food for thought. I told them that sometimes the identification question is used to promote equity, and that equity is the belief that in order to treat people equally, you have to treat them differently because of the various obstacles they have or have not encountered in their individual lives. After all, not everyone starts off on the same playing field. I assigned a one-page reflection due for the next class and dismissed them. On their way out, two students asked if they could erase what had been written on the blackboard. I nodded, wishing it could be that easy.

"HEY MISS, WHAT ARE YOU?"

I've only just scratched the surface.

Four years of teaching later, and I know I still have a lot more to learn. These initial experiences from the start of my career heavily impacted me, and motivated me to return to my studies and complete research on how racialized teachers

understand their work with respect to the role expectations that are cast to them as 'visible minority' educators. In listening to the experiences of other racialized teachers, I developed a clearer understanding of the role of race in education. Numerous teachers spoke to me about how they were expected to be specialists in multicultural education simply because of the colour of their skin, or in some instances, suspected that they were hired to fill that role. I came to understand how the capacity to teach students about multiculturalism was surely accessible to all educators, but was first and foremost born from an individual consciousness of race, power, and social inequities. The challenge then became the unformulated path to acquiring this awareness.

I believe the act of becoming a teacher entails the simultaneous commitment to learning forever. What we can teach and how we relate to our students is directly related to what we know, understand, and believe ourselves. Teachers must reflect on their own attitudes toward race, equity, and multiculturalism since this will determine the ideologies with which they enter the classroom and interact with students. Whatever it is that we want to transfer on to our students must first and foremost, begin with us. We should not be afraid of learning from our multicultural classrooms. Students should be challenged to comment on what their gender, sexuality, ability, class, and race has afforded them or cost them, and how these categorizations are governed by the norms of society. So much of what we teach depends on who we are. Providing students with a multicultural education does not mean being able to complete a checklist of required elements in the curriculum. It does, however, mean helping kids recognize that there are people in the world who benefit from racism, and that power relationships do exist and do play a role in who gets hired for a job, in which parents are heard in the school system, and in who makes the big decisions.

As Social Science teachers, what do we do when all our resources only depict dominant perspectives, when Black History is confined to the lessons of one month or when a student uses the generalized 'they' when referring to people of a certain skin colour? Issues of culture, race, and difference need to be explicitly addressed and openly discussed in a world that is becoming more globalized with every passing day. One of the most common responses to multicultural education from teachers is not there isn't enough time, or that there aren't good resources, or that they just don't know how. While I hope this book can help with the latter, I hope it also highlights the fact that the former two are not necessarily add-ons to the work that one already does.

Multicultural education is not a lesson plan, or a unit, or a one day per year event; it is the language we use to teach, it is the dialogue we choose to initiate, and it is an individual consciousness of how the social differences in our world impact our lives. Dear educators, I understand that it is not easy, but I promise you that it is worthwhile.

NOTE

[1] I have made the conscious decision to refer to certain terms within the confines of quotation marks because of their frequent, yet uncritical usage in popular discourse. These loaded terms come with heavy implications, and as teachers, I believe that so many of the lessons we impart to our students are embedded in the words we choose to use.

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