Denise Manning 627-Final Paper

**Thesis**

Three words to describe the trajectory of issues in Multicultural and Anti-Racist Education based on the data I’ve collected are: Silence, Awareness, and Experience. This paper will detail the progression of conversations around issues in Multicultural and Antiracist Education and its application in the classroom as a result of societal changes. Also focusing on the underlying challenges within the Black Experience resulting in a fractured sense of community and self-perception that perpetuates racism.

**The Past- Silence (G.I. Generation)**

Based on the data collected the past, 1930-1950, is marked by silence. Miriam Manning, 92, reflects on the days of her primary and junior high school education stating, “differences existed but weren’t talk about at school or home”. I inquired further as to why the differences weren't addressed during this time Ms. Manning stated, “I guess it was a couple things, one manners, it was polite not to talk about differences, we’re all people. The other was even if adults said something against what we were taught, we weren’t allowed to question them. Children were sent away when adults talked and if we overheard, o well we weren't supposed to be there”. My response, “how can a ghost question a man?” We chuckled a little. Though ingrained today in Caribbean and Black culture, “children are seen and not heard”, it actually puts limitations on the extent of progressive informal educational opportunities within a family and leads children to seek answers from peers or hands-on experiences.

Ms. Manning grew up in Manhattan, New York not far from Park Avenue. When asked about the demographics of her neighborhood she states there were a good amount of Caribbean families, “families that looked liked mine”. When asked about the demographics of her school, she states, “it was a mix of Black, Caribbean, and Italians”. She stresses the “I” in “Italians”. She informed me that children went to neighborhood schools. When asked where the Italians can from, she said, “the next block over, but did not see them in her particular neighborhood”. For the time period I understood not talking explicitly about racial differences in the classroom but I still could not wrap my head around this culture of silence concerning other multicultural differences. So I had to ask, “what about classroom expectations from the teachers or class differences, no one seemed poorer than anyone else?” Ms. Manning answered calmly to my apparent distress,“we wore uniforms, my mom made my clothes, no we didn't know”. A little agitated I asked about lunches who had more or less, the Caribbean, Blacks, or Italians. Coolly again Ms. Manning stated, “we went home for lunch from 12-1”, we didn't know”. I was beginning to realize that silence may not have been the only theme present within this generation. Ms. Manning did not seem to want to know what else was happening in her neighborhood, she was happy. Silence may have been the prominent theme but it was maintained with contentment. There was no need to discuss issues in multicultural or antiracist education because they did not want to be impolite and cause unnecessary drama for the time period.

**Black Experience- Self-Perception**

The Bluest Eye written by Toni Morrison was first published in 1970, and set in the 1930s-1940s it is fiction but rooted in the Black experience. Due to societal determinations of beauty, “grown people” and “Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspaper, window signs-all the world agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured...they said, this is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it” (pp.20-21). Having the features of a White child were considered beautiful and the norm was established.

In the novel Pecola Breedlove struggled with this idea of beauty. It was not that she was not a pretty little girl it was that no one told her she was a pretty little girl. Instead the community focused on the need to label her based on her family's’ socioeconomic status and because she was Black. Toni Morrison details why the Breedloves live in an old storefront one room apartment:

They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly… Pecola Breedlove wore [her] ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to [her]” (p.38).

Pecola Breedlove had internalized the opinions of the community concerning her family and believed the only way to overcome the pain she was experiencing was to have the blue eyes of Shirley Temple and Mary Jane. Toni Morrison writes,“it had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes...were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different….pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue eyes.” (p.46). Pecola prayed every night for a year to have blue eyes so that not only her looks would be different but her life. In comparison to the little White girls around her, Pecola’s world was sad and coated in self-loathing as a result of her family being considered ugly by the community and the ugliness of the treatment she received within her family. It did not seem to occur to anyone in the novel to let Pecola know that she was pretty and that being Black is beautiful.

Pecola’s desires turned into obsession even believing that eating a sweet Mary Jane candy was an escape from being Black, “to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (p.50). This idea of beauty perpetuated by the adults in her community sent Pecola in a tailspin, never realizing her self-worth. After losing her father’s baby, after he raped her, Pecola’s prayers are “answered”, she sees herself with blue eyes. Morrison comments that when,“a little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl; and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (p.204). At the end of the novel Pecola gets her wish but just because she sees the blue eyes does not mean everyone else does. As she sits talking to herself admiring the gift, the community is crossing the street to avoid her, she was no longer alone, she talked to herself. The community continued to shun her. It was this lack of acceptance and nurturing that lead to the horror in the fulfillment of Pecola’s wish.

In the afterword Toni Morrison discusses the motivation for her novel. As a child she met a little girl who defined beauty in a similar way as Pecola:

Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale? The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her….The assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/racial foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze” (p.210).

It is what Blacks as a community allow in a gaze that perpetuates the feelings of young Black girls to believe that having Black skin is not beautiful. How many people really believe “the darker the berry the sweeter the juice” when describing a Black woman? The Black community does more harm internally than other races do externally when describing the beauty in dark skin. There is a history behind it as noted by Toni Morrison but it can be reclaimed and the fracture can heal, but first a new norm must be set.

**The Past...1994- Awareness (Millennial Generation)**

Unlike in the 1930s-1950s, in 1994 there was an awareness of cultural, racial, and ethnic differences in classrooms and neighborhoods throughout the country. There was also a deep desire to talk about them. The problem was that it had not yet manifested itself into the general curriculum to be taught to young children like me. The classroom was no place for these conversations. I had mine on the playground.

Informally, I was aware of ethnic and cultural differences but it was not discussed in the classroom. Formally, we learned about African Americans in relation to slavery. Native Americans through colonization, for example, Thanksgiving and the Trail of Tears, but there was no mention of pride or connection to roots, it was just history. History told from the perspective of the dominant White culture. I was very fortunate to attend elementary and middle school in East Boston. It was there that I learned about the different ethnicities represented in brown skin. I learned about some ethnicities within South America. At first everyone was considered Spanish or Hispanic but I found that this was too broad and that Spanish is not only a language but there was a place called Spain that it originated from. Not all the people I went to school with were from Spain. Some of my classmates were Ecuadorian, El Salvadoran, Venezuelan, Costa Rican and Mexican. During this time period I was considered African American, I had little knowledge of the different Caribbean ethnicities either. My classmates showed great pride in knowing more about their backgrounds and not being classified as simply Hispanic. Formally, in the classroom there was no mention of famous explorers or the rich histories of Latin America. In 1994 we were aware of cultural differences informally but formally the dominant culture prevailed in keeping that knowledge away from the youth of America.

**Black Experience- The Oreo Label**

As a child no matter how much I wanted to I did not feel accepted by my family. I am Black. My mother is Black. My father is Black. My sisters are Black. My friends at the time were Black too. I was just never Black enough and they all told me every chance they could.

I was labeled an Oreo, Black on the outside and White on the inside at the early age of eight. I did not understand so young why my own family would separate themselves from me. Like Pecola I wondered what I had done to deserve such treatment? I internalized it, I believed that I was different, maybe they were right about me. I remember one night crying to my mother that my feelings were hurt by this awful label. Maybe she was trying to make me feel better when she told me that “you do act White”. Another push toward separation. What did acting White mean to an eight year old? I thought I was just being me. It was then that I withdrew from my family and stopped trying to be accepted and just be whatever me I could be. I also stopped attending birthday parties, family dinners, most gatherings really and chose instead to hide out in rooms with books, instead of mingling. I had been rejected by my family and friends and did not want to meet more Black friends to be rejected again. I separated myself from them so they could not hurt me and in that process I lost something else, my ability to naturally socialize with peers without the fear of rejection. I became quieter at school, at home, and at church. The only places I felt safe were the worlds that books brought me to. This created other problems for me as well that continued the Oreo label well into adulthood.

In valuing books and education I had become even more of an Oreo, “choosing” the mannerisms and language of the dominant culture thus rejecting what my family considered being Black. I could not win. Like Pecola the difficulty was knowing that my family, friends, and community placed the label on me. I was so young I just wanted to fit in and feel loved by those I loved. Why had my Black community hurt and shunned me? Was I a reflection of their own self-loathing or their own fears of inferiority? I was eight. I still don’t know the complete answer. I do know that I was different and they used that to hurt me. Pecola was rejected by her community because of her covering of ugliness. I was rejected in part for my love of books. There is a connection between race and intelligence that has been explored formally and informally in urban education.

**The Present- Experience (Homeland Generation)**

Lailonah Manning Pierre attends Boston Renaissance, a charter school, in Boston. This generation unlike any previous generations are engaging in multiple experiences simultaneously due to mainstream and social media. Due to these societal changes the experiences are being reflected in the classroom affecting curriculum. Students today are experiencing and engaging more with issues in Multicultural and AntiRacist Education. Formally, in classrooms we are seeing the application of cultural, racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation related curriculum.

In June Lailonah states that her class learned about African culture in music class, “we watched a video of African women who were sick dancing for seven days and then falling on the ground and a spirit coming to heal them, some people thought it was evil others did not.” Her class has also studied other cultures throughout the school year.

As a dynamic way of experiencing curriculum for their first field trip of the 2015-2016 school year they went to Plymouth Plantation, a cultural experience, and learned about the Wampanoag tribes that were settled there and the effect of colonization on their survival, “they died of a disease that spread quickly”. She emphasized that she learned about the colonists and the Native Americans to learn both sides of the story. She was also excited to tell me about her experience holding a musket, “which is a gun, it was heavy but it was fun”. Laionah notes that it was important for her learning that her teacher, “spoke in different accents to help students learn”.

She also told me about her knowledge of Lexington and Concord and Samuel Adams who “went to the old church bell showing 1 lantern by land and 2 by sea at Lexington and Concord, and John Quincy Adams”. She did not fully remember the events but her excitement to share was evident in her experience with the curriculum.

Another field trip they went to was the Boston Tea Party and was able to play different parts of the conflict. “I was in jail but I wasn’t really. After the man was done writing a letter we got to throw tea overboard, and the water splashed on us which was refreshing and cool.” I asked why they were throwing the tea overboard, “because it was very expensive, most people could not afford it”. The Homeland Generation’s ability to engage with the curriculum at this rate is a sign that more multicultural and antiracist issues can be applied seamlessly into all parts of a public school curriculum.

There are currently court cases being played out on social media detailing the experiences of LGBT youth asking to be recognized not by their outward genders but how they feel on the inside. This was unheard of even five years ago. Lailonah can tell you at the age of 10 with respect what it means to be a lesbian or homosexual. Young people have taken greater strides in shaping their educational experiences.

As a result of a petition at Boston Latin School concerning minority students and equality the headmaster and assistant headmaster resigned last month. I am sure that that was not the intention of the student lead petition but their voices were heard, a response was made, and action was taken at an unprecedented rate.

My twenty year old nephew felt comfortable coming out at bi-curious earlier this year. He is interested in exploring his sexuality with all people. I asked him if he would have felt comfortable expressing these feelings even five years ago he said no. We are experiencing several societal changes and engaging in thoughtful dialogue like never before. Instead focusing more on understanding multicultural issues and not limiting our curriculums to tolerance.

At Boston Green Academy, as a 9th grade advisory teacher, we created and implemented a LGBT advisory curriculum around our students experiencing a well known teacher transitioning from a woman into a man. The focus of the curriculum was promoting understanding, letting students know that he was still the same person he always was. Now his inside matched his outside. Don’t we all have that basic right, to be who we are, without fear of retribution or outright hate due to misunderstandings? This generation is experiencing a new coming of age story that has not been fully told. Mainstream and social media is leading the charge, for better or worse.

**Black Experience- Building Acceptance**

Beautiful. Accepted. Lovable. In the documentary *Dark Girls* the fracturing of the Black community on the grounds of skin color is explicitly discussed. Older women and young girls share stories about how having a darker skin complexion has affected their emotional well being. That the awful names they were called like “tar baby” and “mudduck”, were said to them by other Black children. Black women stated they wanted to take baths in bleach and hoped that their children would not be dark like them. They interviewed Black men who stated that they would rather date a “light skinned” girl because they are beautiful and darker girls are not.

Even after the days of “I’m Black and I’m Proud” anthems skin lightening creams and procedures are becoming more and more common around the world. In Africa, skin lightening products that can burn the skin off your body are still selling with all the risks known to them. This self-loathing thought process has answered Toni Morrison’s question about whether Black women feel it is better to look freakish, with self made burn marks, than be what you are (p.210). This is not just a fracture of the Black community in America, it is global. As long as the Black community perpetuates the White dominate ideal of beauty our children will continue to feel inferior.

Black women may be telling their young daughters that they are beautiful but the mainstream media is lightening their role models in cosmetics commercials and on the covers of magazines even taking away their curves. It is only recently that models and actresses are speaking out through social media about the discrepancies. *Dark Girls* notes that 75% of girls with low self-esteem engage in self harming behavior. In America the Black community has shown unity and resiliency during uncertain times but it dissipates. A solid Black community is necessary to reinforce beauty, strength, and intelligence to young people.

*Dark Girls* has a very poignant scene of a young Black girl, no more than 7, sitting with a line of different colored pictures of little girls ranging from White to Dark. The interviewer asks the little girl, “who is the pretty girl?”. She points to the White girl, “why?”, because she’s light skinned”. “Who is the ugly girl?” She points to the darkest skinned girl, “why?”, “because she’s dark”. The little girl is then asked “who is the smart girl?” She points to the White girl. “Why?”, because she’s light skinned”.“Who is the not so smart girl?” She points to the darkest girl. “Why?”, “because she’s dark”. This scene properly sums up the the fractured Black experience expressing self-loathing and feelings of inferiority based on skin color, within the Black community, and the slave mentality ideas of race and intelligence. A smart Black is trying to be White. Unity is necessary to re-teach that little girl that she is beautiful and smart because all people have the ability to learn and grow.

**The Future- Multicultural and AntiRacist Education**

The next phase of multicultural issues introduced into the classroom will be religion, immigration, antiracism, and social class. Based on the progression of conversations detailed in this paper and the use of mainstream and social media these topics will soon be openly discussed in the classroom not as a form of teaching tolerance but as a well structured curriculum focusing on student discussion and reflection. I can see an amazing humanities and history curriculum in my mind. I can see my niece discussing immigration and religion openly with respect or reverence for those that practice it. We are past the time of seeing and staying silent. We are past the time of being aware but not active. The present is marked by experience and a call for action. The future of Multicultural and AntiRacist Education will be marked by unity within the Black community resisting tearing each other down and focusing on rising each other up. It will be marked by the social experiment of $15 an hour minimum wage by 2020 and how it impacts social classes. It will be marked by the 2nd generation American immigrants breaking whatever glass ceilings that are above them. All issues related to Multicultural and AntiRacist Education will find greater support. This time period will be marked in the history books not by the dominant White culture but be written by those leading the crusades. In classrooms today we don’t have just one book to teach from, we have greater access to the world and every race, culture, gender, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation. We will educate our students and promote greater understanding of differences and commonalities and in return they will continue to push us to be better educators.

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