



Transforming an ordinary literacy experience into a journey of empowerment.

From Silence to Voice: A Story of Empowerment for a First-Year Teacher and Her Students

Angelina Walker

Arhythmic hum fills the classroom as the students enter, eagerly anticipating the morning message from their teacher. As the excited learners gather around the message that is written on the board, several of the students erupt with moans and groans. Why? The message, in short, informs the students that they will be learning about manners during the week and what fourth grader would want to learn about that? As a first-year teacher aiming to survive my first year, and as an African-American woman, I have learned a few tricks of the trade, namely, relate to the students, make the information relevant to them, and they will find purpose and enjoyment in education.

To help my students embark on this journey, throughout the week we read the book, *Manners* by Aliko, as topics of social skills were discussed. We explored questions such as what is this book teaching us, why should we behave in such a way, why should manners not only be used in school but also in our communities, why should we have manners as we get older, and what does it mean to have manners? My goal was that by the end of the week, the students would be able to understand manners and their social ties to the significance of Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement (it was the holiday coming up for the students). I asked them, "How many of you know about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?" and only three students raised their hands, two African-American and one Micronesian student (who realized the importance of Dr. King earlier in the year when he discovered a book about him). I then proceeded to ask the students, "Well, how many of you know why we celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday?" This was an important question to me because it meant, do the students even know why they are having this day off from school? The answer was a resounding, "NO!" Other than the student who had studied Dr. King prior, no other student in the class understood why we had the holiday.

This was a great way for me to connect manners with the community, the world, and give a brief lesson in history. In short, my goals for this series of lessons were not only to encourage manners, but also to promote an understanding and awareness of the social injustices of the world, as well as develop more critical thinkers in my classroom. In an age where teachers are driven by standards-based curriculum and teaching to the test, it is a

calming experience to be able to teach what the students need to know in order to survive in this world. What I mean is that teachers are usually encouraged to produce “proficient” students in the areas of reading, writing, math, and, science; thus, according to some, promoting and ensuring the academic future of our students. Many believe that by doing so, we are creating the leaders of tomorrow through reading, writing, math, and science.

Of course all of these components of education are important; students do need to be able to read, write, add, and so on. However, what about the life skills that are necessary in order for the students to become our leaders of tomorrow? If we think back to our childhood, our leaders were those who broke the mold, who promoted social equality, and who changed the world for the better. So, how do we broaden our understanding of what “proficient” means in an educational setting? I feel that it is critically important to promote social inquiry and understanding in my classroom. The students who become critical thinkers and action takers, are the ones who become proficient in life. They are the ones who understand what it means to promote diversity and culture in a nation that was intended to be built upon these fundamental ideas.

I must admit that my background and life experiences have allowed me to create an educational environment that—in terms of social justice and awareness—promotes individual and collective power. So, what is the pedagogical foundation that I stand upon which influences my daily decisions as a teacher trying diligently to create an essential environment for my students?

Critical Pedagogy, Power, and Diversity of Thought

Critical pedagogy involves naming, reflecting, and acting upon personal change (Wink, 2005). The result is a better appreciation and understanding of knowledge, of learners, and of how learners view themselves. In a sense, this can be called diversity of thought. The question that I ask myself daily is, “What role do I play in that change, that diversity of thought?” I have come to realize through my own reflections and self-discoveries that the avenues upon which learners learn is not a single road but is rather a multidimensional entity. As a critical

educator, I pull from all of my own struggles, preconceptions, and challenges in education to understand the learner. It is my job to transform the classroom into an atmosphere that promotes and values the individual in the collective experience, which results in a generation of power.

To have power is to empower. Wink (2005) discusses how reflection and action lead to empowerment: “Critical pedagogy gives us the power to recognize our own power as professionals. Critical pedagogy gives us the power to understand that we must do the very best where we are today. We cannot fix every educational problem in the world, but we can live our own beliefs in our own communities. Critical pedagogy is the power that leads us from silence to voice,” (p. 103). It is my belief that students must gain power and voice in order to respond to the influences of society. And in the process, I, the educator, will also gain a sense of power within myself and my social atmosphere. By considering education as a social process, my classroom allows students to experience education and its relation to life—promoting diversity of thought.



The Ending of One “Not-So-Ordinary” Literacy Experience

By the end of the week, the students had learned so much more than simply manners from a picture book; they had learned about love, respect, unity, leadership, equality, and peace. Each student made a peace necklace and wore it for two days, symbolizing their desire for a peaceful world. Each student also created an “I Have a Dream” project that not only asked what their dream was for the world (what they would like changed about it), but also the steps they could take, in the school or in the community, in order to make their dream a reality. In essence, the students were creating an action plan to promote diversity of thought throughout their community. It was great to see that many of the students were not perceiving the activities as just a thing of the past, something that happened long ago. All of the students were relating history to their own lives and the world today. For example, one girl has a dream that, “All immigrants will be let into the USA.” When asked about her dream and why she chose it, she told me a heartbreaking story of family members who were not allowed to come into the United States. Other students’ plans of action involved

writing letters to the president, speaking with the principal regarding changes to the current school rules (better protection against bullies), and organizing a collection of goods to give to the homeless population in our neighborhood.

Classroom activities, discussions, and practices help diverse learners discover their own identities. It is important for me, the educator, to understand the importance of identity formation in the classroom. It is important to establish a nonjudgmental position in order to create a classroom environment that encourages the exploration of difference and diversity of thought. It is also important that these types of activities are promoted and produced not only around special occasions or holidays. Daily I am questioning students to help them become more critical thinkers and learners in their own lives, both in and beyond the schoolyard.

Time after time during my experiences in the classroom, I have noted that a supportive environment promotes diversity of ideas and produces and enhances proleptic thought. It encourages the anticipation of doing something different with certain beliefs in mind. An encouraging classroom environment allows students

and teachers to identify goals, recall what they know about goals and goal-orientated behavior, and progress toward their goals and the process of achieving them. Not only am I providing an environment that encourages diverse thought, I am diversifying my own understandings of learning, as well as allowing for the development of diversity, power, and critical pedagogy in my classroom.

Reference

Wink, J. (2005). *Critical pedagogy: Notes from the real world*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

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Engaging in Professional Reflection

What would a classroom grounded in critical pedagogy look like and sound like? Take a look at a lesson you teach and think about how it would change if it reflected the critical pedagogy Angelina Walker writes about.