



Racial Trauma, Language Use and Biases: A Reflection on Harmful Practices in Education

There is an African proverb that says if a child is not embraced by its community, it will burn it down to feel its warmth. The lives of people of color are often depicted based on racial and linguistic stereotypes creating biases and beliefs that are often brought into classrooms by teachers who are White. Although they may have good intentions, these biases are infused into their instruction, affirm their low expectations and as a result, create an unhealthy learning environment for students of color that supports racism within the classroom. So in essence, what they, students of color, experience outside of the classroom in terms of explicit racism based on color, language and citizenship plays out in the classroom more implicitly. In this article, I draw on both my personal and professional experience of racial trauma in the USA.

Julkaistu: 6. lokakuuta 2021 | Kirjoittanut: Renée Heywood

Trauma-Causing Hegemonic Practices

I became interested in the topic of trauma and the adolescent brain after a training on Trauma Informed Care when I worked as the statewide Director in juvenile justice education in Massachusetts, USA. After learning about how trauma affected the brain, I couldn't help but wonder how trauma affected learning and engagement for youth of color. I started to reflect on my own childhood and have had several conversations with people of color about theirs. I was saddened to learn how people have harbored negative feelings about their teachers, who often mistreated them through exclusion, daily assaults on their dignity and overt racism.

I have been applying the term "racial trauma" to the context of education from a critical race theoretical stance. Racial oppression is a traumatic form of interpersonal violence which can lacerate the spirit, scar the soul, and puncture the psyche. Without a clear and descriptive language to describe this experience, those who suffer cannot coherently convey their pain, let

alone heal (Hardy, 2013). Relating this term to an academic setting may seem extreme to some, however, it expresses the damage that is done through our American educational system that, from its inception, has been laced with racism causing harm within the classroom and school environment. Youth of color are affected by oppressive curriculum and pedagogy. They are affected by the implicit biases, racial socialization and power that are manifested through microaggressions and the devaluation of who they are.

As we continue to use curriculum and support learning spaces that devalue and demoralize people of color, we are participating in their daily racial trauma. If the academic standards used, support the hegemonic practices that devalue the culture, literacies and contributions of people of color, we are doing more harm than good in our educational system. When we add colonialism along with microaggressions in the classroom about abilities and language, we are sending a clear message that is counterproductive to what our goals should be as educators.

Racial biases of educators influence their pedagogy. Youth of color fail in school and become trapped in the pipelines of treatment, social service, and justice systems. Our difficulty in meeting their needs is not just because of greater "pathology" or "resistance" as some assert. Rather, we fail to appreciate the ways in which race is entangled with their suffering (Hardy, 2013). Our students of color arrive at our schools already traumatized by systemic racism where their emotional and physical survival depends on how they leverage their own cultural capital in order to navigate the various institutions that were not built with them in mind.

My focus is not to demonize educators, considering I have been one for twenty plus years. I would like to create educational spaces for healing through reconciliation (with the truth of our past in education), restoration of dignity (in the curriculum and in the classroom) and retention of teachers of color (by affirming and leveraging their value to education). For the past several years, I have been committed to educating white teachers about how their actions are perceived and how being reflective and humble can have a positive effect on their pedagogy.

A Critical Look at the Big Picture

There is no single prescription for protecting people against racism, bigotry and hatred; there is no one-shot inoculation against intolerance or fanaticism. However, it appears that educating people to understand that these things do exist, and about the manner in which they are manifested, can be helpful to those who come face to face with them. Racial socialization can be a process whereby individuals are taught how to identify and deflect the potential negative effects of assaults, overt as well as covert (DeGruy, 2005).

Looking at racism, microaggressions and biases, I realized what was missing in education is dignity. The curriculum used in our classrooms, the way that Blacks, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) are treated in the educational system by being suspended at higher rates, the disproportionality of referrals to special education and so much more are proof of the daily assaults to dignity they endure. Too often BIPOC students are disengaged because the low expectations of their teachers are obvious. They do not value the multiple literacies of their students who use the skills to code-switch within various settings. Their students may

subconsciously react to the daily assaults to dignity they receive at the hands (and mouths) of their teachers who do not value their lived experiences. Their students may be disengaged because the curriculum is harmful and does damage to their soul causing them to disconnect in the name of self-preservation. Perhaps a teacher's racial biases cause them to ascribe behavioral issues more often to BIPOC students than their white peers. Educators must critically reflect on their biases and practices overall and specifically relating to language.

Double Consciousness in Language Use

Learning Black Language Matters: Humanizing Research as Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Baker-Bell et al., 2017) provided great insight to how to appropriately teach students how to be linguistically flexible while not seeing their own Black language through a deficit-based lens. All three authors, April Baker-Bell, Django Paris and Davina Jackson, had their own experiences with Black language. April's family valued Black language; seeing it as beautiful and powerful while also being equally respected and as necessary as Dominant American English (DAE). She did not grow up under the linguistic oppression that many people do but started to gain a deeper understanding of that oppression when she started teaching English language at a high school on the eastside of Detroit, Michigan.

Django had a different experience being half black and half white. He witnessed his grandfather speaking Jamaican Patois and couldn't understand why he was unable to understand this other kind of English. This would support his learning in a class he would later take with one of the authors of *Talking Black Talk*, John Baugh.

Davina, a Black woman was humiliated by insulting comments made by her college professor regarding her use of Black language. Her response to that was to be careful not to do the same to her students with regards to making assumptions about their literacies and capabilities. Our own experiences are the lens through which we think and interact with others including how we teach.

This connects to Smitherman's (2006) concept of linguistic push-pull and Du Bois' (1903) notion on double consciousness. Blacks often have to look at themselves through the eyes of others and adjust to the thinking, perceptions and standards based on a larger system of White-centered linguistic hegemony (Baker-Bell, 2017). The aforementioned authors use caution when teaching their students the importance of code-switching or linguistic flexibility. It can be more harmful to teach code-switching without teaching the history behind it because leaving out the history can devalue a young person's language which is very much connected to their identity. After being taught the history behind it, the youth were still able to see their own language as valuable while also understanding that being linguistically flexible is an asset for them in not just one but more than one arena. Helping our youth to see the value in linguistic flexibility is important but not at the risk of them feeling devalued.

Code-meshing is the act of combining local, vernacular, colloquial, and world dialects of English on formal assignments and in everyday conversation, in an attempt to embrace the diverse world in which we reside. By combining our native language with standard English, an effective way to

communicate with a broader audience is created. Code-meshing is the alternative to the oppressive practice of code-switching because it embraces people's cultural differences and allows them to authentically illuminate their personality (Young et al., 2014).

Language and Biases

The perception of the mastery of language influences how one's knowledge is perceived and valued. In the U.S., an assumption of validity is often ascribed to people with certain accents. For example, I was in New York at a conference with people who work in Juvenile Justice Education around the county. We had a visitor from the United Kingdom who was new to juvenile justice. When she spoke in our small groups, one person said to her, "You are probably the smartest one in the room" because her UK accent afforded her credibility and privilege. She quickly corrected the person saying, "Please don't let my accent fool you. I know very little about this industry and came to learn from you." She said very few words but because her accent was closer to the European center of the world she was perceived as more intelligent than the most experienced person in the room who spoke with southern drawl.

The UK accent caused people to ascribe wisdom to her that she honestly did not have. That accent gave her access to power and she could have said almost anything and it would have been deemed valid. So when you put that accent in the midst of policy makers, she would of course, get everyone's attention. In contrast, someone speaking Black Language or identifying as black speaking on what works for African American students in education based on personal experience *and* research, must first prove they are credentialed to speak on such a topic before even being considered a valid source. If educated adults are devalued because of their use of language, imagine how that experience is multiplied for students of color whose mastery of dominant English determines their intelligence in the eyes of many.

Our Responsibility Towards Warmth

The schoolhouse should be a safe place where young people experience liberatory education that is rooted in self-determination, derived from an understanding that all human beings have the right to participate in shaping a world that is constantly shaping them (Randall, 2018). I am reminded of a quote that I use in my own pedagogy: *the academic success of a child depends, in part, on their intelligence but more so on how their efforts to learn about their world is treated by the adults in their lives* (Haywood, 2004). Our goal, as educators, should be to end racial trauma in education by being the village that provides the necessary warmth to support their academic and personal success.

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Artikkeliin viittaaminen

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