

PUTTING THE ELEPHANT INTO THE REFRIGERATOR: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND ANTIRACIST EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT. This paper focuses on student engagement within diverse school communities. It argues for the adoption of an approach to education that combines a form of critical pedagogy and antiracist multiculturalism as a necessary condition for the creation of classroom climates within which meaningful engagement can be fostered.

**RANGER L'ÉLÉPHANT DANS LE RÉFRIGÉRATEUR : L'ENGAGEMENT DES ÉLÈVES,
LA PÉDAGOGIE CRITIQUE ET L'ÉDUCATION ANTIRACISTE**

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article met l'accent sur l'engagement des élèves au sein de divers milieux scolaires. Il préconise l'adoption d'une approche éducative qui associe une forme de pédagogie critique et de multiculturalisme antiraciste comme condition nécessaire à la création d'un climat en classe propice à un engagement utile.

The grade nine students in a large urban high school were engaged in a 'debate' on the value of formal education when the principal entered the classroom. One of the students, Fazia, drew the principal into the discussion to illustrate her point about the limits of higher education. "Sir," she said, "You are the school principal. You are a very well dressed man and as principal have obviously spent many years in schools. You have graduated from university. I have a riddle for you. You have a refrigerator and you have an elephant. How do you get the elephant into the refrigerator?"

The principal was so surprised by the question that he forgot to ask why he would want to put the elephant in the refrigerator. He also neglected to draw on his experiences as a former principal of a school with large food service refrigerators so he didn't say that he would slaughter the elephant, package it in little pieces and then pack it into the refrigerator. He simply said that he didn't know how to get the elephant into the refrigerator.

Fazia looked at him and said, "You open the door. Ninety five percent of corporate CEO's can't answer that question either and they are so-called educated people. This proves the uselessness of education."

Before the principal could think of a response, Fazia said, "I have another riddle for you. You now have the elephant in the refrigerator and it is obviously full. You also have a giraffe. How do you get the giraffe into the refrigerator?" The principal was once again stumped and even though he knew it was a simple answer, he couldn't think of a response. He gave up and said that he didn't know how to get the giraffe into the refrigerator.

Fazia looked at him and calmly said, "You take the elephant out. Ninety three percent of CEO's couldn't answer that question. If these highly educated people are unable to solve a simple problem, what is the point of education?"

This scenario serves as a metaphor to illustrate the dilemmas that we, as educators, face as we work to enact engaging, inclusive curriculum. How can we put the elephant in the refrigerator when it is full of new curriculum, unfamiliar assessment and evaluation strategies, and externally generated standardized testing? Rather than opening the door or conceptualizing a larger refrigerator, we may say that the elephant doesn't belong in the refrigerator. It's not our job to put the elephant there, nor can we fit the elephant's foot in the refrigerator and, having done that the elephant should feel accommodated. We might also speculate that if we put the elephant in the refrigerator then not only is the giraffe going to want in but so is the hippopotamus and any other animal that we happen to allow within visual range of the refrigerator.

From my perspectives as a teacher and educational administrator in Ontario, I present a conception of student engagement that I believe to be fundamental to the enactment of inclusive curriculum. Following this is a delineation of critical pedagogy and antiracist multicultural education, which I consider to be necessary, if not sufficient, conditions for student engagement. Within the context of antiracism, I examine the role that Whiteness plays in student and teacher engagement. An examination of whose realities we accept and perpetuate is important to educational discourse. I assume a critical pedagogical focus such that while we continuously construct knowledge and make meaning of our experiences, we arrive at reality by embracing variant world-views.

The following premises guide this discussion. The first is that public schools, even those that initially appear to be homogeneous, are heterogeneous communities (Carlton, 1974). Schools which do not include members from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds are composed of individuals of varying socio-economic statuses academic strengths, learning styles, gen-

ders, and sexual preferences. While schools maintain societal inequities, these institutions can also be forces for social change (Freire 1998; Ghosh 1991; Young, 1993). Furthermore, I contend that education is not politically or morally neutral and that "all teachers are moral agents" (Boyd, 1992, p.163). Teachers act as moral agents through their status in the community, which is reinforced by expectations for teachers as defined by government legislation. It is also demonstrated on a daily basis when, both consciously and unconsciously, educators support or challenge prescribed values through the inclusion and exclusion of voices, and the manner in which divergent perspectives are presented. Educational legislation, policies and procedures as well as curricular resources are written and presented from within particular locations, belief systems and moral stances. All of the aforementioned impact both on students' feelings of connectedness to schools as a social spheres and on their varying levels of engagement within them as educational institutions.

Student engagement

For the purposes of this paper, I use the definition of student engagement proposed by Newmann, F., Wehlage, G. and Lamborn (1992); namely, "engagement stands for active involvement, commitment, and concentrated attention, in contrast to superficial participation, apathy, or lack of interest" (p. 11). This is consistent with the concept of the term employed in the National Report on Student Engagement (Smith, W., Butler-Kisber, L., LaRocque, L., Portelli, J., Shields, C., Sparkes, & Vibert, A., 1998). These findings indicate that "engaged students were involved in their school work in more than a superficial way that signified some level of commitment and that this engagement extended beyond oneself and one's own work to encompass the wider world of the school and its community" (p. 5). In the scenario at the beginning of this paper, the student was clearly engaged in the discussion. There is, however, some question as to the purposes and interpretations of this engagement. For the student this was an opportunity to interact with the principal as a person rather than as an authority figure within the school. While he saw this as a positive, thoughtful exchange, the classroom teacher cited it as a form of rebellion and yet another example of disruptive, disrespectful behaviour.

There are obviously different ways of being engaged and there is also some question as to how to achieve engagement with students in our diverse communities. In order to even begin to accomplish this, questions as to the nature and purposes of engagement, of what and who is valued, according to whom, and how it is valued, ought to be addressed. While preparing for classes with diverse populations, teachers need to deconstruct their curricular content and pedagogical approaches to uncover and move beyond assumptions of neutrality. For example, teachers are called on to redefine what

literature is taught in English courses where authors are primarily, and in some schools exclusively, White, European or American males from Judeo-Christian traditions.

Although varying concepts of student engagement may be consistent with the above definitions, and could employ some similar teaching/learning strategies, there is some doubt as to whether all types of engagement are of equal value. Some forms of student engagement, which do not address the diversity of our school communities, may be compatible with and yet not lead to critical pedagogy and antiracist education. One way for students to be engaged is for them to have a teacher who presents material in an interesting way or who uses a variety of strategies to convey information that the teacher deems important. This type of engagement could be illustrated if, when teaching a course called 'Families in Canadian Society' the teacher follows the course of study, based on the Family Life Cycle Theory. She teaches other related conceptual frameworks from Sociology, using videos and other forms of media to supplement discussion and providing opportunities for guest speakers and interviews with members of the community.¹ Engagement in this instance means that the students are involved and attentive, the prescribed material is understood and learned and students experience success on tests without questioning the assumptions implicit in the theoretical frameworks.

A second form of engagement is realized when the teacher acts primarily as facilitator, providing and suggesting resources that students may access to learn what they choose about a certain topic. Using the 'Families in Canadian Society' curriculum, students participate in both independent study and group projects, determined by their interests. The students may engage in a variety of activities and successfully complete summative evaluation tasks. However, either because they are not aware of existing inequities or because they are not comfortable challenging hierarchies, they may not choose to look at underlying social, political and economic issues.

A third conception of engagement embraces critical pedagogy and antiracist education as necessary conditions for its realization. This kind of engagement is achieved when students' interests and choices are taken seriously and the teacher working with the students establishes connections beyond the prescribed curriculum to other things including students' lived experiences. The teacher brings to the fore other issues, i.e. political, social and economic undercurrents, not generated by the students. For a 'Families in Canadian Society' course this entails addressing the limitations of, for example, conceptual frameworks as well as the purposes they serve when, in spite of their problematic nature, they continue to be used to inform social policies. Within this paradigm, the teacher and students uncover and articulate the implicit and explicit biases inherent in the prescribed curricu-

lum. Consistent with the 'curriculum of life' (Vibert & Portelli, 2001; Smith et al., 1998), teaching/learning strategies also include independent study projects and community liaison initiatives. Whatever strategy is being employed, the process of unpacking, deconstructing, and reconstructing knowledge is continuous and includes things that the teacher holds to be true. This method, while it encourages the development of students as critical thinkers and change agents, also serves to prepare them for formal evaluation. Engagement in this sense is not simply something that one group (educators) imposes on another (students). It is a cyclical process, which "does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered in the process" (hooks, 1994, p. 21).

In his work on educating democratically, Freire (1998) focuses on the ethical responsibility teachers have to not merely transfer knowledge and contends that, "there is, in fact, no teaching without learning" (p. 31). The teacher is also the learner as we create knowledge together. "Thus, the classroom takes on the appearance of a 'think tank', an institution in which important knowledge is produced that has value outside of the classroom" (Kincheloe, J. & Steinberg, R. 1998, p.6). When students and teachers are engaged, the classroom is a dynamic, energizing environment. This vision of the classroom is inconsistent with the environment Cothran and Ennis' (2000) found in their research on student engagement. They report, perhaps not surprisingly, that engagement was lacking in the urban secondary schools they studied and that students and teachers voiced different perspectives on impediments to engagement. Teachers reported that, "students arrived in class with poor attitudes and low levels of engagement" (p. 110). Students, on the other hand, "did not believe that most of their teachers encouraged or allowed student involvement in class discussions and this lack of involvement contributed to their lack of engagement in those classes" (p. 112). The students indicated that the teachers who were engaging "communicated, cared, and enthusiastically presented learning opportunities . . . listened to students and respected their ideas"≠ (p. 111).

These findings echo those of Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac and Campbell (1995) who found that teachers' perceptions of dropouts, who might be seen as the very disengaged, were that they lacked the "requisite work ethic needed for academic success" (p. 30). The dropouts themselves "felt encumbered by the system and by low expectations of teachers" (p.30). They were dropouts primarily because what was taught in schools lacked meaning because it failed to make connections with their lived experiences. As various stakeholders attempt to shift responsibility for student engagement and achievement, educators need to acknowledge and accept their role in this endeavour. In response to the question of the value of different concepts

of student engagement, I contend that the third concept of student engagement, the goal of which is individual and democratic transformation, is preferable. Recognizing the diverse nature of our communities mandates that we employ a concept of engagement that does not reproduce existing hegemonies, as might be the case with either of the first two models. Although, as the metaphor of the elephant illustrates, there are different kinds of success, when teaching for democratic transformation success also includes preparing students to meet prescribed outcomes and pass mandated examinations. The onus is on teachers and administrators to create inclusive climates that foster student engagement and which can be achieved through the adoption of critical, antiracist approaches.

Critical pedagogy

Consistent with the metaphor of the elephant, critical pedagogy can serve as a means of opening the door and inviting all students to fully engage. "The increasingly multi-cultural nature of today's schools mean that more students disengage from school due to incongruence between their home culture and the culture of school (Cothran & Ennis, 2000, p. 115). This dissonance also extends to other 'differences' that the student's experience, i.e. socio-economic. Critical theory addresses the discrepancies that students encounter by challenging social structures and exposing inequities and inconsistencies between the stated intentions and realized commitments of existing social institutions such as schools. The following contentions are implicit to critical theory: no social system is neutral or natural. "Every social arrangement, no matter how it presents itself as natural, necessary or simply 'the way things are', is artificial. It is usually structured to benefit some segments of society at the expense of others" (Starratt 1994, p. 47). Education is created and maintained by human beings for human beings. It is "socially produced, deeply imbued by human interests, and deeply implicated in unequal social relations" (McCarthy, 1995, p. 37). In spite of our desire to appear neutral and present factual information, when we talk about education "we are never simply describing something, but prescribing it" (Boyd, 1992, p. 161). The existence of power differentials in society impact on "the structure and dynamics of race, ethnic, class, and gender relations" (Dei, 1993, p. 38). An individual's experience of the world is dependent on economic situatedness, race, ethnicity, class, ability, sex and sexual identity. As well, schools recreate and "reproduce inequities existing in society" (Stefkovich & Shapiro, 1999, p. 5). Education is "a moral relationship maintained and mediated by the activity of teachers" (Boyd, 1992, p.159). The ethical challenge, according to critical pedagogists, is to make education more responsive to the human and social rights of all (Starratt, 1994).

As an aspect of critical theory, the Ethic of Critique “asks educators to deal with the hard questions regarding social class, race, gender, and other areas of difference, such as: who makes the laws, who benefits from the law, rule, or policy; who has the power; and who are the silenced voices?” (Stefkovich & Shapiro 1999, p. 6/7) The issues arising from questions addressed by this ethic revolve around: the use of sexist language; racial, sexual and class bias in educational institutions, and in the language used to define social life; and the preservation of powerful groups’ hegemony over social institutions and processes (Starratt, 1994). It is the role of critical, classroom pedagogy, Dei (1993) contends, to “focus on an examination of the ways in which race, ethnicity, class and gender have differentially shaped the experience of being Canadian for different groups at different points in time.” (p. 42) By keeping this focus intrinsic to curriculum development, implementation, and review, educators are able to integrate concepts such as oppression, authority, voice, language, and empowerment in order to educate themselves and assist students in learning how to redefine and reframe other concepts such as culture, privilege, power, and justice (Stefkovich & Shapiro, 1999). Critical praxis both deconstructs, dismantling the existing hegemonic formations, and reconstructs, radically transforming the “existing structures within which learning, teaching and administration of education take place” (Dei, 1993, p. 38).

Rather than embrace critical pedagogy, some schools and school boards address the issue of diversity by offering courses targeting specific groups: such as Black History, Women’s Issues, or Native Studies. Using the metaphor of the elephant, this is analogous to cutting off and putting the foot into the refrigerator. Instead of providing opportunities for empowerment, these token gestures toward inclusivity actually serve to further marginalize peoples’ histories and cultures and maintain dominance. Employing these strategies, schools can claim to be responding to criticisms without integrating all peoples’ histories into the mainstream, compulsory curriculum. The selection of teachers for these courses is sometimes questionable and relatively few students register for them. The percentage of students of European Canadian heritage who choose to take Black History or Native Studies is very small, as is the enrollment by male students in Women’s Studies. My experience is that members of dominant groups who do enroll in these courses are viewed with suspicion and their motives are questioned. Concurrently, students who are members of groups toward whom these courses are targeted are seen as being pandered to while earning easy credits. By separating this ‘special interest’ curriculum out from the mainstream, educators are actually reinforcing the power of the discourses from the Western traditions that occupy the contexts of social privilege (McLaren, 1995). As opposed to creating separate courses, opening the refrigerator door requires educators to integrate their curriculum practices with respect to race, class,

gender, and sexual orientation. This integration must do more than attempt to validate all groups according to European, male standards. Rather than searching for token representatives from 'Other' groups within the framework of the dominant culture, critical pedagogy demands the recognition that groups are differentially situated in the production of knowledge. We need to recognize the importance of providing opportunities for the multiplicity of voices in our classrooms (McLaren, 1995).

Critical pedagogy values diversity as imperative to educational quality and as a condition of social equality and vitality (Gay, 1995). It is important for students, especially those accustomed to curriculum, which reinforces their worldview and experience, to perceive themselves from other perspectives. It ensures that all students see themselves represented in the curriculum and seeks to challenge hierarchical and oppressive relations among people who belong to different social groups. At the same time, it also undertakes to maintain the multiplicity of a pluralistic, democratic society, not just give the illusion of plurality (Montecinos, 1995). As educators we need to ensure that the language and culture of Aboriginal, African, Asian, and South Asian persons does not become subsumed by the dominant culture. This most frequently occurs when dominant persons reframe what nondominant persons believe or say in words that more readily describe their own existence, in terms that they understand (Ritchie, 1995). With critical pedagogy, the pluralistic nature of our society comes to be integral to core curriculum so that; for example, English courses incorporate a variety of authors expressing divergent world-views. Rather than having Steinbeck, from his position of power and privilege, depict the life of indigenous people in "The Pearl," students ought to become familiar with First Nations authors such as Thomas King, Thomson Highway and Louise Erdrich.

McLaren (1995) states that, as educators, it is incumbent on us to recognize the legitimacy of multiple traditions of knowledge. Broadening the boundaries of knowledge to include contributions of groups marginalized by dominant European culture provides students with opportunities to reexamine and demystify presumptions of cultural dominance and to learn about cultural systems other than their own (Gay, 1995). The term 'Border Pedagogy' (Giroux, 1997; Gay, 1995) is used to describe this type of inclusive, critical pedagogy because it 'decenters as it remaps' by contextualizing learning in different cultural references, perspectives, and experiences. This facilitates students' ability to adopt multiple frames of reference and perspectives becoming border-crossers as they explore different cultural realms of meaning, social relations, and bodies of knowledge (Gay, 1995). In themselves differences or "borders are not the difficulty; it is the inflexibility and tenacity with which they are created and asserted that creates problems (Pillsbury & Shields, 1999, p. 412). Critical theory as border pedagogy offers

students the opportunity to engage in multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages. Education entails teaching students to read these codes and “also the limits of such codes, including the ones they use to construct their own narratives and histories” (Giroux, 1997, p. 147). This type of critical pedagogy, like others within this paradigm, incorporates multiple perspectives and locates curriculum within social and historical spheres composed of identity based power relations. It also seeks order to change the existing social power structure by understanding the processes of internalization, opposition, and transformation of the lived experience of marginalization (Giroux, 1997). From this perspective critical pedagogy serves a tool for student engagement, transformation, and empowerment.

Antiracist multiculturalism

Central to the development of curriculum, policies, and practices that provide positive, engaging educational opportunities for all students are the interrelated and overlapping concepts of antiracist multicultural education and critical pedagogy. Antiracist multicultural education is an approach that crosses all disciplines “and addresses the histories and experiences of people who have been left out of the curriculum” (Miner, 1995, p. 9). Multiculturalism and antiracism in some contexts are used interchangeably, while in others are seen as fundamentally distinct perspectives. “The key concepts for the multiculturalist are cultural awareness, equity and self-esteem, the antiracists are more concerned about human rights, power, and justice. While multiculturalists wish to eradicate prejudice, misunderstanding, and ignorance, antiracists wish to fight existing power structures” (Greenlaw, 1996, p. 75). These distinctions, however, are not consistently maintained either in theory or in practice. For example Banks (1993), McLaren (1995), and Gay (1995), from an American perspective, use the term multiculturalism to express ideologies that could be termed antiracist. Within this context, multicultural education, from a critical or antiracist perspective “is a movement designed to empower all students to become knowledgeable, caring, and active citizens in a deeply troubled and ethnically polarized nation and world” (Banks, 1993, p. 23). In Canada, however, multiculturalism is often used in a manner that is inconsistent with critical pedagogy. It is sometimes utilized to highlight cross-cultural similarities and is often intended to portray “something that is quite superficial: the dances, the dress, the dialect, the dinners. And it does so without focusing on what those expressions mean: the values, the power relationships that shape the culture” (Miner, 1995, p. 9/10). Conversely, antiracist education challenges educators to “look at – and change – those things in school and society that prevent some differences from being valued” (Miner, 1995, p. 10). Multicultural approaches that are consistent with antiracist education and

critical pedagogy represent complementary perspectives on engagement for students belonging to diverse groups. As Gay (1995) contends, they provide us with both a philosophy and a methodology. As philosophies they constitute a set of beliefs which celebrate and facilitate individual diversity, autonomy, and empowerment. As methodologies, antiracist multicultural education and critical pedagogy are means of designing and implementing educational programs and practices that are more egalitarian and effective for diverse student populations. Both employ a language of critique, and endorse pedagogies of resistance, possibility, and hope (Gay, 1995, p. 156).

The implementation gap between the development of policies and their actualization in school classrooms has been identified in educational research (Levin & Young, 1994; Werner, 1991). An example of this disparity is the existence of one of the Toronto District School Board's foundation statements and accompanying equity policies when contrasted with its realization. The board documents articulate a commitment to ensure "that fairness, equity, and inclusion are essential principles of our school system and are integrated into all policies, programs, operations, and practices" (Equity Department of the Toronto District School Board, 1999, p. 3). While the Equity department espouses the statement that all students within the board are being enabled "to develop their abilities and achieve their aspirations" in practice this is often not the case. My experiences in schools support the contention by Ellis (1999) that "students who are not middle class and politically White can find it challenging to develop a coherent, positive social identity and to do well in school" (p. 189). This is partially due to the fact that some educators see foci on inclusivity and engagement as add-ons to their already overtaxed time and energy. Without questioning the sources or consequences implicit in delivering existing curriculum, they see their jobs as defined by the transmission of prescribed knowledge to students. Their subsequent task is to evaluate the students' abilities to reiterate information in keeping with Bloom's taxonomy or an externally imposed standard. Cothran and Ennis (2000) report that there are teachers who do not believe it is their role to serve as primary catalysts for student engagement but to supply "valuable information" to receptive students (p. 110). Conversely, Freire (1998) reminds us that, "to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production of knowledge" (p. 30). As teachers we need to acknowledge that our community includes all students in our care who are active participants in the creation of possibilities. It is therefore necessary that we examine our practice to ensure that it provides opportunities for engagement in the learning process for all of our students. As the embodiment of the curriculum the teacher/educator is the key to implementation of critical and antiracist multicultural perspectives.

A genuine commitment to antiracist multiculturalism moves it away from the 'stomp, chomp and dress-up' strategies adopted by many educators. Harper (1997), reports that, "for most schools introducing a multicultural curriculum was an additive rather than an integrative process, so that the curriculum was supplemented with information about food, festivals, and folklore from various cultures but the rest of the curriculum remained largely the same" (p. 200). Antiracist multicultural education, although it may include these aspects of lives, moves beyond them to concerns with correcting the errors of commission and omission related to ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism that routinely occur in school curricula, instructional materials, and classroom teaching. One method of achieving these goals is to include significant contributions of a wide variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups in curriculum content (Gay, 1995, p. 167). If critical or antiracist multiculturalism provides the basis for and informs the curriculum, we create an environment within which "students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality and a sense of empowerment" (Banks, 1993, p. 27). Antiracist representations of race, class, and gender are understood as the result of larger social struggles over signs and meanings and in this way stress the central task of transforming the social, cultural, and institutional relations in which meanings are generated (McLaren, 1995, p. 42). As pedagogy, antiracist multiculturalism, argues that diversity must be affirmed within a politics of cultural criticism and a commitment to social justice. Difference is always a product of history, culture, power, and ideology. Consistent with the third notion of student engagement discussed earlier, in a critical pedagogy informed by antiracist multicultural education, attempts to teach students how to read social and political situations, familiarize them with power interests, and connect ethical values with political actions in order to bring about change become central goals.

Antiracist multiculturalism also compels teachers to take up the issue of difference in ways that do not replay the monocultural essentialism of the 'centrism' (McLaren, 1995). One of the difficulties with Eurocentric approaches is that the inference can be drawn that people are unidimensional. As a facet of critical pedagogy, antiracist multiculturalism takes heterogeneity as the assumed underpinning of its praxis. African, Aboriginal, Asian, and South Asian Canadians, like European Canadians, live in varying socioeconomic classes, live in and come from different geographical and cultural environments, have varying sexual orientations, etcetera (Walcott, 1996). The use of a singular focus or master narrative to represent a group is bound to provide a very narrow depiction of what it means to be Black as it would be for one description to capture the essence of what it means to be White. The same can be said for other racial groups or identifiers. We need to be cognizant of differences within as well as across groups. Essential-

ism also ignores the cultural lives of students who belong to multiple, overlapping cultural groups (Montecinos, 1995). Many students in our schools belong to rich, diverse cultural heritages and attempting to define them as having membership in one group and experiences specific to that group denies the realities of their lives. A person may be a member of dominant and nondominant groups at the same time. For example, a White female may enjoy privilege because of her race and experience oppression because of her gender or her economic situatedness. Individuals may be members of two or more racial or cultural groups. Any unidimensional approach seeks to categorize these individuals as having exclusive membership in one group or another, whether it is Black, White or even biracial, denying the multidimensional reality of their existence. Antiracist multicultural practice needs to be fluid enough to shift between the various historically manifested forms of racism and oppression. As such, it could produce analyses that do not dissipate past or contemporary differences but attempt representations and inclusion of the complex nature of difference (Walcott, 1996).

Those of us who are White educators need to be aware of what we bring to classrooms and schools. A part of that understanding is the need for us to examine our Whiteness and to locate ourselves consciously within the curriculum. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, in order to understand issues of race and culture for ourselves and for our students, we need to understand ourselves as raced participants, not as removed from issues of race and culture. Secondly, because schools within Toronto, and many other North American settings, are composed of multiracial student populations and predominantly monoracial teaching staffs, educators need to acknowledge the significance of race and privilege as they impact on all aspects of educational experience. Intrinsic to multiculturalism informed by critical pedagogy is the "importance of 'White' people rethinking our own 'collective Whiteness'" (Haymes, 1995, p. 107). Those of us who are European Canadians need to examine our own ethnic histories so that we are less likely to judge our own cultural norms as neutral and universal, or as the standard norm. Unless we give White students a sense of their own identity as an emergent ethnicity, we naturalize Whiteness as a cultural marker against which otherness is defined (McLaren, 1995, p. 50). As long as European culture, as the defining cultural frame for White-ethnic transactions, defines and sets the limits on all thought about human relations, there can be no prospect for human equality (McLaren, 1995, p. 52). It is incumbent upon us to move from a position of presumed neutrality that being members of dominant culture and privilege allow to a position from which we can examine and understand our racial identity. In the process we begin to unravel the symbiotic social, economic and political relationships existing among races. Haymes (1995, p. 110) claims that, particularly in our

portrayals of African people, we must recognize the historically specific ways that 'Whiteness' is a politically constructed category that is parasitic on 'blackness.' Although 'White' and 'black' are often depicted as polarities on the colour line, this parasitic relationship is also true of our depictions of other peoples.

Much of the discussion about antiracism, multiculturalism and equity centers around the impact that being African Canadian or Aboriginal has on student failure or underachievement. What is often absent from these discussions and from various interventions is a better understanding of the role that 'Whiteness' plays in the 'minority' student failure. Powell (1997, p. 3) depicts this relationship as a knot in which the White strands are woven into the black in a convoluted way that can actively or passively prevent the knot from loosening. If we can begin to identify a dynamic relationship between 'Whiteness' and the phenomenon that is then labeled 'black underachievement' we might find additional levers for change in African Canadian children's lives. Pulling at the black strands alone cannot untie the knot. This necessary loosening involves pain and learning for European Canadians as we explore our privilege, incompetence, and profound interrelatedness with people of African, Aboriginal, Asian and South Asian heritage. As part of this loosening process, we need to explore our own discourse of deficit, whereby we examine our deficiencies. At the same time, Africans, Aboriginals, Asians and South Asians need to explore their abilities to lead, create and own a discourse of potential, whereby they examine and develop strengths. Teachers have the privilege and responsibility of ensuring that these discourses occur by creating new conversations in our classrooms, which go beyond a description of risk and capacity, to actually demonstrate and develop them (Powell, 1997, p. 10).

Montecinos (1995, p. 297) contends that teachers who understand the formation of students' identities are teachers who also understand the formation of their own identities. Clearly, there are many varieties of 'Whiteness.' We need to examine our practice to identify whose norms regulate engagement and to ensure the inclusion of multiple, diverse norms. In an environment that depicts one version of Whiteness as the norm, it is not only very difficult for students from other racial, ethnic and socio-economic situations to be engaged with the curriculum. 'White' students may disengage due to the ongoing reinforcement of a profoundly false sense of superiority premised almost entirely on denigration and the opposition of 'self' and 'other' required for the racial hierarchy to be sustained. Juxtaposed with this false sense of superiority is the knowledge that it is false, that being 'White' also means ownership of a violent and inhumane heritage and an understanding that privilege derives from the subjugation of others. It is not possible to assume a 'normalized Whiteness,' whose invisibility and neutral

character grant immunity from political or cultural challenge (Fine, 1997, p. 60). In order to create engaging classrooms, teachers must learn to examine the consequences that prevailing social practices have jointly had in the creation of their own lives and the lives of their students and uncover how their lives and the lives of their students intertwine. In doing so teachers can help students recognize and articulate a range of voices because they simultaneously belong to multiple social groups whose boundaries are constantly shifting (Montecinos, 1995, p. 297). We must decide carefully how much, what, and when it is appropriate for us as educators to share with our students our own process around understanding ourselves as White. In sharing appropriately with our students we are able to assist them in developing identities that are multidimensional and avoid the pitfalls of essentialism.

Conclusion

An approach to teaching that incorporates critical pedagogy and antiracist multicultural strategies provides opportunities for all students to feel engaged with their schools. One aspect that is often overlooked, as we focus on Others, is the role that Whiteness as a descriptor, group identifier, and symbol of power and privilege play within our schools. While inextricably linked to the creation of environments crucial to the development of positive self-esteem for Black, Aboriginal, South Asian, and East Asian students, deconstructing Whiteness is an essential stage in the development of positive self-identities for White students. It is through unpacking the meanings attached to cultural and racial identities that the reconstruction process can occur. In this way we create the conditions "in which the learners, in their interaction with one another and with their teachers, engage in the experience of assuming themselves as historical, social, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons" (Freire, 1998, p. 45). Making connections as learners, articulating implicit societal and curricular values, and participating in dialogue across differences in a manner that invites disparate voices can only serve to enhance engagement for students and teachers and increase learning within our diverse communities. The change from teacher as holder and transmitter of knowledge to teacher as explorer and facilitator in the creation of knowledge entails a conceptual shift as opposed to an additional burden. Educators, who see teaching from an antiracist multicultural perspective, wonder why it is so difficult to open the door and invite in the elephant. The resulting ownership of, and active participation in, their education leads to student achievement and success even when it is defined by standardized testing.

Banks (1993) and other writers such as Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998) acknowledge that we have made progress in the areas of antiracist multicultural education. The existence of school board Equity policies is

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evidence that inclusive curriculum which challenges existing structures is seen, in some sense, as a priority. At the same time there is a lack of attention to how the policies are understood and an absence of the impetus that is required for them to be realized at the classroom level. Superintendents, school administrators, and school board consultants in Ontario are spending most of their energies reacting to, and implementing, Ministry mandates, such as standardized testing and grade reporting. As opposed to systemic initiatives, the enactment of engaging pedagogy complete with inclusionary foci is left up to individual administrators and classroom teachers who are often ill equipped for this challenge. In his research with school principals, Solomon (2001) finds that administrators struggle with the realization that the existence of racism in schools and society is compounded by their lack of effectiveness in dealing with it. This impotence is a result of the "limitations of their own understanding and knowledge as well as pressure from members of dominant groups to maintain the status quo" (p. 28). The tensions existing between the demands on teachers and administrators as political and moral agents and the explicit and implicit goals of teacher and administrator preparation programs are areas for further research as we struggle to develop inclusive engaging curriculum for and with all students in our school communities.

NOTE

1. I am not intending to describe in detail strategies that could be assumed to characterize an engaging classroom regardless of context. Any such 'laundry list' of techniques is contrary to the meaning of engagement based on critical pedagogy and antiracist education that I am proposing.

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