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Seeing Beyond Sameness: Using *The Giver* to Challenge Colorblind Ideology

The secondary worlds created in fantasy encourage the reader to compare and contrast the real world with the imaginary. In this way, fantasy as a genre can be transformative. In this article, the dystopia created in The Giver *(1993) by Lois Lowry is examined as a metaphor for racism. After exploring the young adult novel as mystical fantasy in the context of reader response theory, the author evaluates the monochromatic world of* The Giver *as a portrayal of the consequences of a colorblind stance. Pedagogical considerations and implications for practice are also discussed.*

KEY WORDS: *The Giver*; Lowry; fantasy; racism; colorblind.

> "Amazing Grace, also save me
> Was once color blind but now I see."
>
> Al Gore (Zelnick, 2002 409)

Zelnick, "The battle for color-blind public policy."

Lowry, *The Giver*.

The Giver (Lowry, 1993) invites readers to experience a world without poverty, without suffering, without chaos. By presenting a seeming utopia, this sophisticated, multi-layered text engages readers in inquiry about how such a society functions and in the struggle to reconcile it with the reality they know. Within a framework of literacy that demands close inspection of societal practices and social justice through literature, perhaps the most important aspect of *The Giver*'s text is what is absent—not simply the ills of contemporary society, but the value of diversity, the connectedness to humanity, and wisdom derived from historical memory.

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Campbell, "The sand in the oyster."

This text is extraordinary in its content, as Campbell (1993) observes: *The Giver* is "so unlike what has gone before, so rich in levels of meaning, so daring in complexity of symbol and metaphor...that we are left with all our neat little everyday categories and judgments hanging useless" (p. 717). In this article, I examine that which the text reveals by where it is, perhaps intentionally, silent—a phenomenon Lowry (2002) alludes to, noting, "often what is left out is the most important part of a book" (p. 148). By exploring my own experience in conceptualizing its utopia/dystopia and my conclusions drawn by filling in the gaps in the text, particularly through the lenses of racism, power, and social structures, I interpret *The Giver* as "fiction as a means of telling us something about reality" (Iser, 1978, p. 53). Accordingly, I consider *The Giver* as an investigation of universal fears of the unknown and of difference, and its implications for our historical and current notions of race, colorblindness, and social injustice. The complexity and ambiguity of the colorblind stance is further analyzed and weighed in the context of pedagogy and educational practice.

Lowry, "Lois Lowry."

Iser, *The Act of Reading*.

The Giver as Mystical Fantasy

The Giver's protagonist, twelve-year old Jonas lives in an utopian community, or so the reader believes at the outset. It is a seductive world where there is a comfortable order, a harmony and routine of life that lacks pain, conflict, or grief. The community thrives around its sterile "sameness," with an emphasis on logical order. Elders determine its members' purpose largely by age and match of personal abilities to the community's functional needs. As with all "twelves," Jonas is to be assigned his lifetime community role at the annual Ceremony; he is bestowed a great honor to be named the next Giver. Slowly the burden of this role is revealed: in order to protect the stability of the community, Jonas must receive and internalize from the current Giver what is exclusively his—the community's collective historical memory and all the attendant emotions. Ultimately, Jonas comes to know how dysfunctional his community really is. This gradual recognition culminates with the revelation that his father, as a nurturer of the community's newborns, is routinely committing infanticide when he "releases" them. When Gabriel, a baby with whom Jonas is very close, is slated for release, Jonas escapes the community with him to go Elsewhere.

The dystopia that Lowry creates becomes increasingly alarming as the reader recognizes what is lacking: emotions, choice, art, music, color. Lowry relies on the reader's aesthetic stance to allow for an empathetic understanding of what Jonas' world had sacrificed for the comfort and safety of order (Lowry, 2002; Rosenblatt, 1986, 1985). It is in the "space between" that the readers fill in the gaps regarding

Rosenblatt, "The aesthetic transaction."

Rosenblatt, "Viewpoints: Transaction versus interaction: A terminological rescue operation."

Benton, *Secondary worlds: Literature Teaching and the Visual Arts*.

Harding, "Psychological processes in the reading of fiction."

Eeds & Wells, "Grand conversations: An exploration of meaning construction in literature study groups."

Higgins, *Beyond Words: Mystical Fancy in Children's Literature*.

this secondary world and perceives it through the lens of their own culture and experience (Benton, 1992; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Harding, 1962; Iser, 1978). This is the very essence, if not purpose, of fantasy: that the readers ultimately analyze and readjust their own world view by comparing and contrasting it to what is presented in the fantasy world. Higgins (1970) describes this process in emphasizing not the imaginary world created by the author, but rather the ability of the author to entice the reader to willingly suspend disbelief when entering the secondary world. He writes that "inventiveness...is not to be judged by how *far out* the imagination of the writer may take his readers, but rather by the degree to which he can make the readers believe in the world he has created. After they have believed, finally returning to their own world, to what measure then will their own world seem different to them?" (Higgins, 1970, p. 28). What does the secondary world that Lowry has created encourage us to reassess in our own real world?

Daly, "Iser, Crutcher and the reader: Creating the world of Sarah Byrnes."

We, as readers, become engaged in Jonas' predicament and, while his journey may be painful, our interest in the human experience results in a pleasurable literacy event nonetheless (Harding, 1962). Further, the inherent ambiguity of *The Giver*, the community lexicon of euphemisms—release, stirrings, Elsewhere—heightens the reader's "wandering viewpoint" (Iser, 1978). Readers must constantly shift and refine their own "mental map" to realize the secondary world, assimilating subsequent clues that Lowry divulges about Jonas' community with "the aim to keep readers off balance, and therefore, continually constructing the meaning of the text" (Benton, 1992; Daly, 2002). Lowry fully capitalizes on this uncertainty by forcing each reader to construct his or her own ending, as Lowry remains intentionally ambiguous and consistent in her subsequent refusal to enlighten her readers—despite requests spanning almost ten years—with a definitive fate for Jonas and Gabriel.

Lehman & Crook, "Doubletalk: A literary pairing of *The Giver* and *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*."

Lowry, *Number the Stars*.

Tyrell, *The Themes of Conformity and Non-conformity in Lois Lowry's Number the Stars and The Giver*.

Several social themes in *The Giver* have been examined in recent research articles. Lehman and Crook (1998) noted three distinct themes in their literary pairing of *The Giver* and *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*: while children may have fears and feel controlled by adults, they are empowered to change society; the significance of historical memory, or the lack of it, as a means to avoid pain; and control and safety versus freedom and risk-taking. Conformity and nonconformity in two of Lowry's works, *The Giver* and *Number the Stars*, are considered in Tyrell's analysis (2000). She elaborates on how power and authority are used to manipulate people and society, noting that "extreme longing for safety and comfort gets out of control" resulting in communities sustained by lies (Tyrell, 2000, pp. 54–55). Gross (1999) considered issues of child

Gross, ''*The Giver* and *Shade's Children*: Future views of child abandonment and murder.''

abandonment and murder in fantasy through *The Giver* and *Shade's Children*. She explored the value of the individual versus the welfare of the group as represented in *The Giver* and, more notably, the notion of abandonment not as a literary device to set the plot in motion, but as an integral and constant aspect of the fantasy world. Thus, in *The Giver* and in *Shade's Children*, the protagonists must not just overcome their own abandonment but restructure the entire society in order to eradicate its ills. Jonas ''faces nothing less than how to clean up the mess the adults have made of things...he must save society'' (Gross, 1999, p. 111). These concerns—control, conformity, safety, abandonment, individual versus societal needs—contribute to and perpetuate underlying fears of the unknown and of difference.

Haley-James, ''Lois Lowry.''

Lowry resonates with readers because she takes them to ''their own times of hollow places that ache with memory and with fear'' (Haley-James, 1990, p. 423). Almost as soon as we are introduced to Jonas' utopian community, we are exposed to suspicious rules and rituals. None is more disconcerting or perplexing than the concept of release and of Elsewhere. The narrator tells us that ''release of newchildren [infants] was always sad, because they hadn't had a chance to enjoy life within the community yet. And they hadn't done anything wrong'' (Lowry, 1993, p. 7). Later we learn that ''those who were released—even as newchildren—were sent Elsewhere and never returned to the community'' (Lowry, 1993, p. 43). Thus, Jonas' world is one in which adults do not protect the children, despite the depiction of an ideal nurturing family unit. Gross further expands on this concept by illustrating that *The Giver* adds a new dimension to the abandonment fear. That is, it is not abandonment at the individual level, but incorporated in the community such that ''adults generally are unconcerned about children and unwilling to put them first'' (Gross, 1999, p. 106).

Initially it is unclear where Elsewhere is and it remains ambiguous throughout *The Giver*. We envision Elsewhere as in the far distance where Jonas, at least, has never gone: it is a dangerous place, primarily because it is unknown. Still, Jonas speculates that ''the land didn't *end* beyond those nearby communities. Were there *hills* Elsewhere?'' (Lowry, 1993, p. 106). What is quite certain is that Elsewhere is the destination for those removed from the community, often as a result of nonconformity/difference or rule violation; removal and association with Elsewhere is generally a disgrace. Yet, the elderly are sent off to Elsewhere in celebration and great anticipation; perhaps it is not all bad in Elsewhere?

Lowry, "Newbury Medal acceptance."

Lowry, "The village of childhood."

Lowry, "Bright Streets and Dark Paths."

In her Newbery Medal Acceptance speech Lowry shares her own conceptualization of Elsewhere—a culmination of many memories. Lowry (1994) remembers how her parents had tried to make her childhood "comfortable, familiar, and *safe*...by shielding me from Elsewhere" (p. 418). But, her inclination was to attempt to see what lay beyond for herself, to find what she felt was lacking in her own world (Lowry, 1997). Lowry describes living in a safe, comfortable, familiar Americanized village within Tokyo and her experiences riding her bicycle—without her parents' knowledge—into Japanese communities, enjoying the contrast to her own life. She also recounts an experience of participating in exclusion: in college, she and other girls mistreat her roommate. She recalls, we "react with a mindless cruelty...: we ignore her...pretend that she does not exist...make her invisible" (Lowry, 1994, p. 416). And Lowry's mother recalled the neighbor on the quiet street where Lowry's grandparents and Lowry (in her early childhood) lived, who beat his children: "We could hear them yelling. My mother would close the windows on that side of the house" (Lowry, March 4, 2001, p. 16). Those real world children became invisible too—as did the children in the secondary world of sameness and conformity in *The Giver*.

Houston, "The contradictions of diversity."

Fear manifests itself in curious ways. Integral to the concept of Elsewhere are recognition and fear of difference. In Jonas' world those who do not conform are banished; sent Elsewhere. Sameness is paramount through all dimensions of the community; its structure, rules and rituals breed familiarity in all aspects of life. As Houston (1999), reflecting on issues of diversity, states, "We trust those things that are inside [our circle] and that are known and familiar, and we distrust and fear those things that are outside and that are not known" (p. 1). Sameness protects that which is inside the circle and eradicates—ignores to the point of invisibility—that which is outside it, not only in the fantasy world but also in our own world.

Early indications of this preoccupation with sameness are expressed by Jonas' sister, Lily, in her description of visiting schoolchildren from a different community. Lily says that their behavior made her angry because they did not follow the rules. These other children were "like animals"; the narrator tells us that "Neither child knew what the word meant, exactly, but it was often used to describe someone uneducated or clumsy, someone who didn't fit in" (Lowry, 1993, p. 5). In an instant the readers are led to question the harmonious utopian society that has been promoted, juxtaposing these sentiments of deficit orientation, anger, rejection, and judgment of others' worth. Such negative reaction to difference implies the sanctity of the converse: the norm, or in this case, Sameness.

It is considered rude in Jonas' world to draw attention ''to things that were unsettling or different about individuals''; ultimately one who pointed out differences would be called in for chastisement (Lowry, 1993, p. 2). The initial instance of this concept occurs when Gabriel is brought home and Lily comments that both the baby and Jonas have pale eyes, unlike just about everyone else in the community who has dark eyes. Later, Jonas observes that one did not ask even friends certain questions, ''because it might have fallen into that uncomfortable category of 'being different.' ...Always better, less rude, to talk about things that were the same'' (Lowry, 1993, p. 38). Yet, doesn't such a stance as adopted in *The Giver* suppress the natural orientation to recognize difference? Noticing difference is inherent in human logic and rationale, integral to such cognitive activities as categorizing. Molly Bang (1991) suggests that noticing contrasts is core to our survival and to our understanding of the world; ''contrast enables us to see'' (p. 80). Thus, human perception is based on recognizing contrasts. Without recognizing contrast, we lack in human perception and understanding as evident in Lowry's dystopia. The comparison of Jonas' secondary world to our real world view, then, directs us to troubling the notion that this same tactic of ignoring human differences—a colorblind stance, for example—may be prevalent in our own society with similar consequence.

Bang, *Picture This: How Pictures Work*.

Judgments of human worth extend to all persons of all ages in the community, including infants as noted above. We are reminded of this fact repeatedly in the context of Gabriel's fate. Gabriel, now a toddler, had not been able to sleep soundly enough through the night to be placed with a family unit. Gabriel had been fortunate in being labeled (a routine practice in his community) as ''uncertain'' rather than ''inadequate,'' which would have resulted in his release. Labeling and categorizing members of the community—recognizing difference in certain contexts—maintains order and removes choice, a potentially destructive element. By virtue of the ''right'' categorization or label, if one is deemed to fit in, an individual is assured a place in the community. The matter of choice is deferred to the Elders, the dominant and controlling group in Jonas' world, because choice requires acknowledgement of difference and contrast. In a peculiar circular argument, one might propose that choice is dangerous unless exercised only by the dominant who know how to make the right decisions, in which case, choice ensures safety and sameness. Jonas does not comprehend the concept of not fitting in: ''How could someone not fit in? The community was so meticulously ordered, the choices so carefully made'' (Lowry, 1993, p. 48).

If people had the ability to make choices, the wrong ones might be made. Jonas and the Giver converse about this very topic after Jonas suggests that the ability to choose might be an alternative to Sameness:

> ''But later it *does* matter, doesn't it? We don't dare let people make choices of their own.''
> ''Not safe?'' The Giver suggested.
> ''Definitely not safe,'' Jonas said with certainty. ''What if they were allowed to choose their own mate? And chose *wrong?*
> ''Or what if,'' he went on, almost laughing at the absurdity, ''they chose their own *jobs?*''
> ''Frightening, isn't it?'' The Giver said.
> Jonas chuckled. ''Very frightening. I can't even imagine it. We really have to protect people from wrong choices.''
> ''It's safer.'' (Lowry, 1993, pp. 98–99)

Thus doubt regarding individuals' abilities and judgment yields certainty in the benefits of a controlled society. Sameness appeals to that childhood fear; it affords, really guarantees, safety. By fully subscribing to Sameness, all risk of individuality—of choice—is eliminated. Yet, in a paradoxical way, such certainty raises still further doubt in Jonas' mind, derived from his unique role within the community. He is at once revered as the future Giver, but is also situated as an outsider. He is isolated in his duties as a result of his special ability—to ''see beyond.'' Lowry (cited in Currier, 2002) has commented that ''the artist is always the 'outsider' in mainstream society—the one who peeks beyond the edges of the known—the one who explores, takes risks. Often, I think, this is not the role one chooses—but rather the role that somehow one is chosen for'' (p. 2). And so it is with Jonas, who can see color.

Currier, ''Interview with Lois Lowry.''

Jonas' world is monochromatic, in keeping with sameness. It is, in effect, a literally colorblind world: there is only distinction between shades of gray, as Jonas' blue eyes are characterized as pale, while the rest of the community's brown eyes are dark. Since there is no collective memory of color in the community, the absence of it does not seem to impair daily life. Color is significant in *The Giver* as representative of memory and ultimately of wisdom. The Giver tells Jonas that he will see all of the colors because he has the capacity to see beyond, and when he does he'll ''gain wisdom, then, along with the colors'' and all of the memories (Lowry, 1993, p. 95).

Jonas first begins to ''see beyond,'' to see color, in fleeting glimpses of certain objects. Red is the first color he sees in connection with an apple. An intriguing parallel might be drawn between the utopia/dystopia Lowry has created and the color red's association with both holy and satanic activity, or the apple as the forbidden fruit. Jonas

continues to catch traces of the color red as his awareness develops. He sees it in the color of Fiona's hair and in the faces of the audience at the Ceremony. The Giver explains the absence of color, including skin tone, as a choice the people made in order to gain control over other things, to get to Sameness. Jonas mistakes the color of flesh as red, but The Giver indicates that ''there was a time, actually...when flesh was many different colors. That was before we went to Sameness. Today flesh is all the same, and what you saw was the red tones'' (Lowry, 1993, p. 94).

Assessing Our Own World Against the World of *The Giver*

How can Jonas' world inform our own? What is Lowry intimating about living with the certainty of Sameness versus living with the uncertainty of difference? Many attributes of Jonas' community are common to our own: the role of power and the dominant, fear of difference, ''outsiders,'' and the ''invisible,'' to name but a few. Segments of our society have adopted a colorblind stance—an indirect stance of Sameness—often well-intentioned on the surface but not without difficult consequences. The remainder of this paper considers the questions of racism and colorblind stances in our own world, as raised by experiencing the dystopian world of *The Giver*.

Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, ''Construction and initial validation of the color-blind racial attitudes scale.''

Orth, ''John Marshall Harlan.''

Cose, *Color-blind: Seeing Beyond Race in a Race-Obsessed World.*

McConahay (cited in Neville, Lilly, Lee, Duran, & Browne, 1986) notes that as society changes, so do race relations and the contexts in which racism may be manifested. In the notorious case of *Plessy* vs. *Ferguson* (1896), Judge Harlan argued in his dissent that ''the Constitution is colorblind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens'' (Cose, 1997, p. xi; Orth, 1992). The case challenged the Louisiana Separate Car Act: Homer Adolph Plessy prearranged a confrontation by sitting in the ''white'' car of the train. Plessy was one-eighth African-American by his own calculation and looked white (Cose, 1997, p. 17). Thus the case did not only call into question the Louisiana law but was in part about racial classification, in an era where there was presumed genetic difference amongst races and when the ''one-drop rule'' (any African-American blood categorized one as black) prevailed. Harlan railed against the separate but equal argument, urging the Court to focus on ''what everyone knows: The thing to accomplish was, under the guise of giving equal accommodation for whites and blacks, to compel the latter to keep to themselves'' (Orth, 1992, p. 362). Harlan failed in altering the Court's stance and it was not until 1954 with *Oliver Brown* et al. vs. *Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* that the Court declared that separate but equal had no validity, particularly in education. The opinion of the Court stated that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal and that segregation, for black children ''generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the

community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone'' (Woodward, 1974, p. 147).

Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (3rd edition).

In this post-Civil Rights era, it is no longer acceptable to attribute racial differences to genetics, thereby generating new narratives that attempt to accommodate racial and cultural differences (Lewis, 2001). These new narratives are situated in a societal paradox: racial and ethnic histories and experiences that divide are silenced in an effort to create a sense of community. Williams (1998) posits that ''there is a pronounced preference in polite society for just letting bygones be bygones'' such that ''the public secret of human fallibility, whose silence we keep to honor our symbolic civic unity, is vastly complicated by the counter-secret of palpitating civic discord'' (p. 13). Further, Howard (1999) argues that the ''luxury of forgetting'' is only afforded to the dominant; that for the oppressed the ''American Dream has often become an unbearable nightmare'' (p. 59). Imbedded in such selective memory are those myths which reinforce the ''specialness,'' the rightness, of white dominance—a ''view of reality that 'makes sense' to the dominant, despite the destruction and annihilation imposed on other peoples'' (Howard, 1999, p. 59). The fact that the dominant can choose to ignore other people's realities is perhaps the most pernicious aspect of white privilege (Howard, 1999, p. 62). Thus, as in *The Giver*, selective memory creates a sense of numbed peace for those who ''fit in,'' for those whose profile is consistent with the norm.

Lewis, ''There is no 'race' in the schoolyard: Color-blind ideology in an (almost) all-white school.''

Williams, *Seeing A Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race*.

Howard, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*.

Among these newer narratives originating from such selective memory is the concept of colorblindness, that is, that race should not and does not matter (Neville, Lilly, Lee, Duran, & Browne, 2000). Accordingly, a colorblind stance implies the conscious effort not to see skin color. Those who adopt a colorblind stance in an effort to be egalitarian perceive themselves to be ''completely free of prejudice and are often unaware of their own assumptions about other racial groups'' (Tatum, 1997, p. 95). In the classroom, colorblind teachers speak of not recognizing the race(s) of their students or assert a race-neutral orientation (Lewis, 2001; Schofield, 1986). Additionally, colorblind adults typically think of racism as acts of meanness overtly directed to individuals or groups rather than recognizing pervasive institutionalized systems that privilege some but not others (Tatum, 1997, p. 95). Such colorblind stances promote the ideology exemplified by the community of *The Giver*, that is, emphasis on Sameness and avoidance of difference, particularly at an individual level, with no awareness of the institutional systems at work.

Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*

Schofield, ''Causes and consequences of the colorblind perspective.''

Neville, Lilly, Lee, Duran and Browne (2000) looked at colorblind racial attitudes, specifically regarding the ''race *does* not matter'' aspect of the stance (rather than *should* not matter, which is presumed to be

a widely held public view). They found that higher levels of colorblind orientation were associated with higher levels of racial prejudice. However, such racial prejudice may not be overt. Rather, a colorblind stance may be indicative of adopting a distorted view of racial and ethnic minorities as well as race relations in general (Neville, Lilly, Lee, Duran, & Browne, 2000). Higher colorblind attitudes also appear to be related to a greater belief in a just world that is fair; belief in a just world presumes a meritocracy and that the ''circumstances of one's predicament have nothing to do with social structures'' (Neville, Lilly, Lee, Duran, & Browne, 2000). In Jonas' world, Sameness has resulted in the abdication of a meritocracy for a society where all aspects of the community are dictated by the dominant power, the community Elders, without challenge, question, or choice. Howard observes that a colorblind stance originates from the perspective of the dominant, because recognizing differences threatens the ''rightness'' of the dominant. '' 'We are all the same' translates as 'we are all like me' ''; this sameness is of great comfort to those accepted as dominant or as within the protective veil of the dominant (Howard, 1999, p. 54).

There is an eerie consistency between Jonas' community and the colorblind stance in its inability to appropriately assimilate difference. The attempt to ''not see race'' is founded in egalitarian ideals, that is, in treating everyone the same. The colorblind perspective seeks to ignore race and ignore differences so that they become invisible to achieve an illusory state of equality. The implication of such an orientation is that any difference is a cause of discomfort and therefore, must be ignored, denied, or eradicated. When speculating on the origins of *The Giver*'s community, Lowry (2002) suggests that the impulse toward safety and comfort are likely sources. In the context of racism and diversity these benevolent attributes assume pernicious meaning.

Gates, Jr. & West, *The Future of the Race*.

A colorblind attitude renders those of color invisible; it fails to see individuality but instead lumps people, particularly African-Americans, *en masse* in an ''undifferentiated blob'' (Gates and West, 1996, p. 84). There is nothing new about this concept; its origins are in DuBois' ''Veil of Color,'' meaning a history of slavery, Jim Crow and segregation that has separated blacks and whites (Gates and West, 1996). The ''veil'' promotes a theme of black namelessness that Ralph Ellison so eloquently describes: ''I am an invisible man...I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me'' (Ellison, 1994, p. 3). The conventions of Jonas' world dictate refusal to see difference; in our world one might argue that the dominant group chooses not to see, as Lowry suggests in the anecdotes from her childhood noted previously. Such an

Ellison, *Invisible Man*.

interpretation would be supported by West who identifies the intentionality with which black people have been excluded from society. He argues that ''an unrelenting assault on black humanity produced the fundamental condition of black culture—that of *black invisibility and namelessness*'' (Gates and West, 1996, p. 80). The result of black invisibility and namelessness is life without meaning, hope or love, also true of life within *The Giver*'s nameless community (except for the Giver and Jonas).

Pedagogical Implications

Arguing that racial matters are so pervasive in society that schools will have no impact in altering attitudes of future adults is an abdication of our social responsibility. In fact, schools may provide the perfect forum to germinate discussions about, and critical inquiry into, racial inequity (Lewis, 2001). However, schools will have to undergo some rigorous self-assessment of their own environment before they will be successful in such endeavors.

Patricia Williams, in *Seeing a Color-Blind Future*, shares an anecdote about her young son whose nursery school teachers were convinced that he was colorblind. Indeed, when he was asked what color grass was, he resisted identifying a color, or would say that he didn't know what color grass was, or most curious, would say that it made no difference. It was then that Williams (1998) discovered her son emulating colorblind teachers, who told the children that color doesn't matter (p. 3). Williams' son is black; his nursery school was predominantly white. In reflecting on the colorblind approach Williams (1998) characterizes it as imagining inclusiveness by imagining away any differences—where the drive is to conform to the norm of ''whiteness'' (p. 6).

Derman-Sparks, Gutierrez, & Brunson, *Teaching Young Children to Resist Bias: What Parents Can Do.*

Paley, *White Teacher.*

Yet children as young as two or three recognize physical differences such as skin color (Tatum, 1997; Derman-Sparks, Gutierrez, & Phillips, 1989). Paley (2000) notes that ''anything that a child feels about himself which cannot be referred to spontaneously, casually, naturally, and uncritically by the teacher can become a cause for anxiety and an obstacle to learning'' (p. xix). The emphasis placed on ''race does not matter,'' however, is indicative that the reality is just the opposite. A colorblind stance perpetuates the ''paradigm of thought by which children [and adults] are taught not to see what they see, by which blacks are reassured that there is no real inequality in the world, just their own bad dreams'' (Williams, 1991, p. 13).

Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights.*

Janet Schofield (1986) undertook a four-year study of a desegregated middle school in a large, northeastern city which had made strong

efforts to provide a positive environment for interracial education. Wexler's faculty generally subscribed to the colorblind perspective; about 25% of the faculty was black. Schofield (1986) found that the colorblind stance creates an opportunity for, or results in, avoidance of dissension, conflict, awkward or embarrassing social situations, and a simplified decision-making process, similar to the benefits of *The Giver*'s community. In essence, colorblindness was used to justify actions that were acceptable in a colorblind environment but would have been otherwise considered discriminatory. For example, one teacher Schofield (1986) interviewed had purposely miscounted the votes of a student election so that the "responsible child" won, rather than the "unstable child." The responsible child was a white boy; the unstable child was a black girl. The teacher, who was somewhat embarrassed by her actions, justified them in the context of the democratic process: they were in the best interest of the school; and she had looked at the children as individuals and did not consider race. She ignored the fact that her decision changed the racial composition of the student council. Schofield observed that, in this case, the colorblind stance was used to create a level of acceptability (altering the results using race as the criteria would have been unacceptable) and to create a false simplicity to the decision-making process. In other words, the colorblind stance resulted in extensive blinders regarding the complexities and ramifications of the decision.

In a second study, colorblind perspective was examined in a mostly white suburban elementary school. Lewis (2001) found a disjunction between colorblind perspectives and the reality of color-consciousness. Citing Crenshaw, Lewis (2001) concurs that, "in its assertion that race does not matter, colorblind ideology attempts to mask the power of race as it simultaneously demonstrates precisely the difference race does make" (p. 801). Moreover, she indicates that the colorblind perspective is more akin to being blind to the effect of color and that the impact on children of color in such an environment is far from benign. On the other hand, color consciousness "recognizes the ways in which skin color and other superficial features of individuals adversely and unfairly affect their life chances" (Gutmann, 1997). From *The Giver*, we might extrapolate further that not only are there negative effects to being blind to color, there are missed opportunities and delights in not being aware of color. In discussing the need for multicultural curricula, Delpit (1995) notes that the absence of color and cultures in demonstrating achievements of other persons is detrimental to all children. Rather, "our children of color need to see the brilliance of their legacy, too" (p. 177).

Gutmann, "Color conscious."

Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*.

Commenting on the case of *Regents of University of California* vs. *Bakke* in 1978, Justice Harry Bakkum stated: ''In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way'' (Cose, 1997, p. xxv). In essence, we must find a way to see beyond. Nieto argues that affirming diversity is the first step, in that ''affirming diversity is above all about social injustice'' (Nieto, 1999, p. 2). As educators we must understand, as Delpit (1995) phrases it, the ''worlds we carry in our head'' and how different the worlds of others are; we must reach beyond into worlds we may not be aware even exist (p. xiv). But how do educators accomplish this? Delpit (1995) suggests that at a very fundamental level, the answer lies in ''understandings of who we are and how we are connected and disconnected from one another'' (p. xv).

Nieto, ''What does it mean to arm diversity?''

Often the term ''diversity,'' particularly in the school context, has assumed a perverse meaning in which an individual is perceived to represent a demographic category (Stotsky, 1999). For example, it is sometimes argued that ''African-American'' students think and learn one way; ''Asian'' students in another way. Beyond concerns of stereotype, these students are losing their voice as unique individuals. Multicultural curricula that emphasize food and festivals from various cultures, dubbed the ''tourist curriculum'' by Lewis (2001), further undermine understanding individuals as such. As is so central and detrimental to the society portrayed in *The Giver*, colorblindness and categorization reduces groups of individuals to ''sameness'' (Tatum, 1999). Color conscious teachers, by acknowledging the social meaning of race, promote the recognition of a child's racial/ethnic identity (Tatum, 1999). Seeing beyond the ''tourist curriculum'' requires schools to evaluate and challenge the structural inequalities that exist within institutional policies and practices (Nieto, 1999; Tatum, 2000).

Stotksy, ''Multicultural illiteracy.''

Tatum, ''Color blind or color conscious?''

Tatum, ''Examining racial and cultural thinking.''

Implications for Practice

White teachers must reflect on their own complicity in promoting or sustaining colorblind ideology, and its attendant implications for systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Cochran-Smith, 2000, p. 158). Courses, curricula, and practice need to be examined in the context of ''unlearning'' racism, the rightness of whiteness (which might be defined as the absence of color), and learning to see ''whiteness'' as a racial identity (Howard, 1999; Williams, 1998). In essence, white teachers will have to reassess white privilege and rethink education about race. Sleeter (1993) suggests cultural immersion to facilitate reconstruction of white teachers' perception of children of color. Further, development of multicultural education needs to originate from multiracial teacher collaboration in order to be comprehensive and inclusive (Delpit, 1995; Sleeter, 1993). All teachers must

Cochran-Smith, ''Blind vision: Unlearning racism in teacher education.''

Sleeter, ''How white teachers construct race.''

find ways to grapple with the concepts of power and otherness in their teaching, to ''recognize and overcome the power differential, the stereotypes, and the other barriers which prevent us from seeing each other'' (Delpit, 1995, p. 134).

The duality of white identity is complex, but significant for teachers and children alike to consider. Whiteness implies ''racist and antiracist, part of the problem and part of the solution, both benefiting from oppression as well as opposing it'' (Howard, 1999, p. 114). Indeed, as long as the current societal paradigm exists, whites will, willingly or not, be the beneficiary of white privilege to some degree. Society can choose to only associate whiteness with privilege and oppression; however, in order to transform schools and power structures, society must ''search for an authentic white identity based on a desire for social justice rather than a dependence on dominance'' (Howard, 1999, p. 114). In doing so, the opportunity will be created to move beyond the tensions and negative imagery inherent in white identity to a constructive, positive stance (though the legacy of oppression will never be fully eliminated).

Young children establish many of their early perceptions, including discomfort, fear, and rejection of differences, from parents, family, and teachers. Derman-Sparks et al., (1989) indicate that these early perceptions may develop into real prejudice if parents and teachers do not intervene (p. 3). Among their advice to parents is to teach all children how to recognize and challenge biases and to let children know that they can change injustice (Derman-Sparks, Gutierrz, & Phillips, 1989). As Tatum (2000) observes, ''To interrupt the cycle of racism, young people need to understand how prejudice and racism operate in our society. They also need to feel empowered to do something about it'' (p. 54).

A colorblind stance limits the potential for white children to consider the transformative power they may have at their disposal, now and as adults. Simply put, if there is no acknowledgement of systems of difference, of dominance, and of privilege—if we are indeed all the same—there is no need for contemplation of inequity or change. Further, there is no recognition of the variation within one's own whiteness, and therefore, few options for their own white identity. Howard (1999) notes: ''To teach [white children] that there are different ways of being white, and that they have a *choice* as white people to become champions of justice and social healing, is to provide them a positive direction for growth and to grant them the dignity of their own being'' (p. 112). The core of this notion is troubled by Williams with respect to people of color, but has relevance to whites as well. She discusses as critical to resolving divisions ''remaining true

to *one* self...considering how we can align ourselves with a sense of the world. Creating community...involves negotiating real divisions...and of pondering our differences before we can ever agree on the terms of our sameness'' (Williams, 1998, p. 6).

The Giver as text is ideal for fostering inquiry into racism, a colorblind stance, and social justice, as well as for raising questions of self, identity, difference, and the other. *The Giver* is a text that engages, provokes, sometimes repulses. In a curriculum of empathy, this type of text is critical ''to encourage students to question everyday acts or ideas that they take for granted...to look beyond their own world,'' to put themselves ''inside the lives of others'' (Christensen, 2000, pp. 5–6). It is a struggle in which teachers and students must engage together. The interrogation of society and self is difficult work. *The Giver* lends itself well to examining the underlying construction of sameness, difference, identity, and of the standards by which self and other are determined, both in Jonas' world and in our own. It locates transformative power in both text and reality. This is indeed the potency of authorship: ''Each time a child opens a book, he pushes open the gate that separates him from Elsewhere. It gives him choices. It gives him freedom'' (Lowry, 1994, p. 422).

Christensen, *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*.

Lowry, ''The Remembered Gate and the Unopened Door.''

Woodward (1974) says of the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s that ''hope rather than despair bred rebellion'' (p. 191). Hope was the genesis of Jonas' departure from his community and of the Giver's encouragement to do so; of their attempt to alter their unjust society's future by traveling to Elsewhere. There is hope in the opportunities for personal renewal, for acting in new and different ways, in imagining ''a different world, a different balance of forces'' (O'Reilley, 1993, p. 35). It is my hope—and belief—that children are already engaged in this vision, as Paley (2000) would lead us to believe: in young children's imaginative play, they ask not ''Where do you come from?,'' but rather, ''What role will you play?'' (p. 136).

O'Reilley, *The Peaceable Classroom*.

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