

IDENTITY WORK AND EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE

BY MINJUNG PAI

“His dad’s in jail, right?”

We were in a class discussion about *Locomotion* by Jacqueline Woodson (2004). We just found out that Lonnie’s mom passed away.

As a class, we were practicing and modeling active reading. What did we know about Lonnie? What could we infer? We asked about Lonnie’s dad. Where was he? What happened to him?

A student, eleven years old and white, said, “His dad’s in jail, right?”

If you have read the book, you know that Lonnie’s dad passed away in the same fire as his mother. You also know that Lonnie is a young, black boy.

I wish I could tell you that I facilitated a discussion about the connections between us as individuals, implicit biases, society, and injustice. I wish I could tell you that I took that emergent curriculum and did an in-depth study with my students about how oppression happens at four levels—individual, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural. I wish I could tell you that I was able to plan units and teach lessons to my students about how to recognize, honor, and utilize differences in addition to naming systemic and historical discrimination based on differences, especially race. I wish.

Instead, in that moment, all I was able to say was, “Really? Where did you read that? Let’s go back in the book.” When we didn’t find the text evidence, I framed the student’s assumption about Lonnie’s father as a simple reading comprehension mistake and nothing else.

In that moment, I felt unease in addressing the uncomfortable truth in my student’s statement, “His dad’s in jail, right?” Because I had done no personal, internal work without the buffer of curriculum and best teaching practices, I was unable to lead a discussion about individual biases and how they are rooted at a systemic level. I was unable to be conscious of how a lifetime

of micro-aggressions brought up emotions on a personal level that contributed to my silence. I was unable to teach about how seemingly small moments like my student’s statement are intrinsically connected to oppressive systems and culture. I was unable to do so because I had done no such work on myself.

How many more moments like that are there in my teaching past that I can’t even remember? What were the hidden messages for my students in those moments? What did students internalize and learn from my inability to address the truth?

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I had done work looking at my pedagogy: looking to diversify the content and represent differences, finding frameworks that I thought transformed my classroom culture. But this was all external. I did not look at the most important piece, at who was doing the teaching, at me. As a woman of color, I had a lifetime of dealing with oppression and a racial literacy that I brought to my teaching. This was not enough.



As much scholarship and good work as there are around cultural competency, inclusive classrooms, and diverse curriculum, it can do more harm than good if teachers do not do their personal identity work. I know that I did harm when I was unable to acknowledge the complete truth in my student's statement. And to be clear, the responsibility of this work does not fall only on teachers. Schools must support this work to impact true change for equity and social justice.

Personal identity work is nuanced, complicated, and ongoing. At the core of my identity, there is my personality; it's the essence of who I am. Also integral to my identity is how I have been socialized, how I have been implicitly and explicitly taught to think and feel about differences, how the different groups of which I am a part shape who I am, how I interact with others, how others interact with me, and how I teach. And this is just the beginning.

This is not about being a good or bad person. This is not about feeling shame at biases and ignorance. This is about educational justice. Our schools and educational institutions are perpetuating white supremacy. This must change.

And what can I do? I'm just one teacher.

I can start with me. I can start by dismantling the oppression that lives inside of me and liberating my students from that oppression.

Diversity, equity, and inclusivity require scholarship about process and content, and the process is rooted in me—how I interpret, how I engage, how I teach. Personal identity work is imperative for teachers committed to educational justice.

It is through this intentional, explicit, and sustained effort that I can truly work toward equity. Maxine Greene (2011) said, "Part of teaching is helping people create themselves." This is a great responsibility we have as educators—supporting our students in the process of becoming, helping them to come

into consciousness. What consciousness are we facilitating? A consciousness that continues to participate in the oppressive status quo or a consciousness that is about liberation?

And that is my charge—liberatory education.

Works Cited

Greene, Maxine. *Creativity, Imagination, and Innovation Symposium*. New York, NY: Columbia University. 2011.

Woodson, Jacqueline. *Locomotion*. New York, NY: Penguin Group. 2004.



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A fifth- and sixth-grade teacher in Los Angeles, Min believes that collaboration is at the core of teaching—by creating a community of students, parents, and teachers, education can have a lasting impact. Her teaching practice is focused

on social justice and progressive education. At her school, she serves on the Board of Trustees, the Diversity Leadership Team, and the Social Justice Anti-bias Curriculum Task Force. She is a member of the UCLA Writing Project Leadership Team, serves on the board of the Southern California People of Color at Independent Schools, and has presented multiple workshops at the National Association of Independent Schools People of Color Conference.

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