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Multicultural Education

Final Paper: Praxis creative essay

May 9, 2015

**Bob: A Hallmark of my “Multicultural Becoming”**

Remembering to write my field notes is at best, surprisingly tough, and at worst, impossible. I blame Wednesdays. After spending six hours in the third grade, I rush home to eat, after which I go to a TLI student meeting followed by my three-hour writing center shift (some “help” I must be so late at night). As I walk to Quaker Fun School—granola bar and coffee in hand—I always imagine that *this time* will be different.I will write my field notes as soon as my writing center shift is over. Alas, it is comically easy to make declarative promises about the behavior of my future self when it’s 8 in the morning and I’m sipping caffeine. In reality, it is often the following morning as I shower, brush my teeth, or pack my lunch that the task—“Oh! My field notes!”—zips into my mind once more, a fleeting reminder, which is at risk of being forgotten (again!) if I don’t respond right then. And thus, many of my field notes this semester were written with a sort of frantic energy. *Sit down right now and just write. Now. Ok, so what happened? I arrived at school. Nice, boring, start….but then what? How could I have forgotten? It was literally yesterday. Just write something; Jody said that if you start to write, the rest will come to you.* And so, I always started with one internal prompt: think about Bob. What happened with Bob yesterday?

Bob is the first student I met at Quaker Fun School (QFS), an independent Quaker school (hence the oh-so-clever pseudonym name) in a Philadelphia suburb.

The first student who introduced himself explained that he would someday be famous, so I could look forward to having known him. I thought this was rather adorable:) I can tell I like 3rd grade as an age group already! (Field Notes January 28)

I knew from the start that I liked Bob; he was funny, friendly, and interacting with him immediately reminded me how much I love spending time with children his age. While I will be  excited to discover that Bob is indeed famous in the future, for now, I’m certain Bob was right about one thing; I will always be glad I knew him. He is in the third grade, plays the drums, reads at level “N,” will soon be a big brother, shares Doritos after school, and wrote a report on Frederick Douglas. These are some of the things I learned about Bob during my weekly visits at QFS. Reading my notes from this semester, I’m struck by how frequently my observations of Bob became the focal point, highlight, or disappointment that I articulated in my field notes. I assumed that my final field note document would tell a more nuanced story, one that reflected the variety of themes and questions my classes addressed.  It seems, however, that I was inclined to shape the story of my field notes—*Write something down. Ok, what happened with Bob?*—according to my own bias. As my field notes act as a form of dialogue between what I observe and how I react to what I see, it is important to keep Ellsworth’s reminder that nothing is a “neutral vehicle” in mind. Like dialogue, my field notes make for a “constantly interrupted and never completed passage” (Ellsworth 49). They tell the story of a future teacher (me) observing pedagogy, helping with student book clubs, and re-learning about fractions, all the while paying close attention to Bob and how he was treated in the classroom. As the only black child in the class with only two non-white students (Bob and an Asian boy), Bob—according to my biased, Baldwin-reading eyes—was frequently treated differently than his white peers.

On my first day at QFS, I commented that the school was calming, potentially projecting my assumptions about Quakerism onto the whole community.

I’m especially excited to learn as much as possible about the Responsive Classroom approach and the Quaker values instilled in the curriculum. The classroom only has 13 students. There are two teachers in the room. Looking back, my first day at school was so *calming*, which isn’t something I often feel when working in DC or even remember feeling as an elementary school student. I really feel that I’m going to learn some valuable lessons from the community. (Field Notes January 28)

Reflecting back on these notes from my first day at internship, I’m inclined to ask: *calming at whose expense*? As my semester progressed, I began to see the ways in which Bob was frequently silenced or dismissed. If achieving “calm” meant getting rid of Bob, was “calm” really something I should be applauding in the classroom? Why was I inclined to label a class of mostly white children in suburban Philadelphia as “calming” and directly contrast this with my summer teaching experiences in DC with students of color. Here, I see how my own field notes could be a form of micro-aggression, as I was pathologizing certain communication styles as ideal (Sue). Later, however, I noticed how my initial generalizations about the school atmosphere were over-simplified.

Observing music class at QFS, for example, was a maddening experience, as the white music teacher frequently sent Bob to the back of the room for minor disruptions.

The music teacher sent the only black boy to sit in the back of the classroom (without his recorder so he couldn’t even play!) when he was disrupting the class. This is the second time I have seen the teacher do this, and while I only go to music once a week, I have never seen him send a white child to the back of a room without a recorder. Once, however, he did send one of the children with autism to the back of the room *with* his recorder so that his playing (he did not have the notes right) would not bother the other children. (February 18)

In this observation, I noticed that the white teacher made certain accommodations for a child with a learning difference but not for Bob, who was fidgeting in his seat. I believe that there were clear racial micro-aggressions in the music teacher’s classroom. Sue describes racial micro-aggressions as “difficult to identify, quantify, and rectify because of their subtle, nebulous, and unnamed nature. Without an adequate classification or understanding of the dynamics of subtle racism, it will remain invisible and potentially harmful to the well-being, self-esteem, and standard of living of people of color” (Sue 270). While I could see how his behavior was nebulous and harmful, the music teacher likely felt he was an accommodating teacher; it seemed to me that his micro-aggressions were invisible to him. While not entirely inclusive of the child with special learning needs (he still felt the need to dismiss this child to the back of the room), the music teacher at least attempted to give this student a chance to play the recorder. In doing so, then, the teacher probably could not see how he was not accommodating to *all* students. My frustration with this teacher’s micro aggressions only grew stronger:

It seems that he sends the one black child to the back of the room *every single* time. No wonder he feels antsier and shows body language that seems anxious each class...he is not getting enough practice when he keeps being sent to the back of the room for behavior that the other kids are also doing! This could also contribute to how the rest of the class forms their own understandings of race. Kids should be allowed to move their bodies. (February 25)

The same kid got sent to the back of the class for music. This is getting ridiculous! (March 18)

Music class was *almost* better today, but then, alas, the teacher sent the same child to the back of the room to sit out for dancing. I asked the child afterwards how he was feeling (I could tell he was mad) but he did not seem interested in talking with me, which I respected so I gave him space. Still, it is so maddening to see how adults have so much power to influence kids’ moods. Gahh! (April 1)

As the third-grade class prepared for the same concert every week and Bob was repeatedly sent to the back of the room without his recorder, a clear message was conveyed that the contributions of Bob to the concert performance were “unimportant” (Sue 274). The consistency with which the teacher sent Bob to the back of the room during my visits made my blood boil, as evidenced by the growing frustration I expressed in my field notes. When the teacher sent Bob to the back of the room, he also made space for the others students to project onto Bob similar micro-aggressions: “the girl in the class who seems to be a leader sort of grinned and shared little snickers with other students across the room when the one black child was reprimanded for not paying attention” (Field Notes March 4). When this girl seemed to take delight in the teacher’s dismissal of Bob, it saddened me to watch how students appeared to interact with one another, especially compared to the class described by Maria Kromidas. Blood, birth, and bodies, tragically, seemed to matter in this music classroom. This same student, E, knew how to provoke Bob:

E raises her hand to tell the teacher that “Bob keeps telling me that I’m stepping back onto this riser but I’m not” Then the teacher says, “Bob pay attention and don’t do that” and then Bob says (which is true!) “Well the boys behind me are pushing me so I end up falling on E.” The teacher responds, “Bob, I can send you to sit out if I have to. Get serious” ARE YOU KIDDING ME? He threatens to send Bob out of the class-he does this every single time! I am so frustrated with just this one teacher. E tattled on Bob for a certain behavior, and he gets in trouble for it. Then he explains that his behavior is due to the kids behind him doing the *same thing* E accused him of doing, and yet Bob gets in trouble AGAIN! Urhhhhhhhh.! (April 8)

While Bob and I had established a friendly relationship in math and reading, he did not seem interested in discussing his own (quite visible) anger with me. Although Freire expresses that “liberating education is a social process of illumination,” it matters *who* is engaged in this social process (Freire and Shor 109). For Bob, I was not the person with whom he might like to illuminate the injustices of music class. This is reflective of Kumashiro’s question: “how should teachers address the hidden curriculum if they acknowledge that students come to school with multiple lenses that influence what and how they learn in unpredictable ways” (Kumashiro 43)? While I still do not know the unpredictable lessons Bob and his classmates took from music class, I know that Kumashiro’s question is answered and worth grappling with.

It was time to do or say something. While being a visitor in a classroom can feel uncomfortable, I had established a strong relationship with Teacher J, which allowed us to approach conversations about my observations. Our discussions were encouraging in their honesty and acknowledgement of challenge. I developed great admiration for Teacher J, and became convinced that she was a multicultural educator in her insistence that she “effectively facilitate learning for every individual student, no matter how culturally similar or different from herself or himself” (Gorski 1). The notion of being committed to justice not just in theory, but also in practice, is one which all teachers must actively keep in mind in their practice. One of the reasons why I feel hopeful is because of Teacher J’s willingness to discuss and reflect on her practice as it related to Bob and his family.

Last week, she mentioned to me (after I told her that I am taking Multicultural Education) at recess that it is challenging for her sometimes to meet with or send notes home to parents who have opposing discipline and parenting structures than she does as a teacher. She feels like they aren’t even talking about the same thing sometimes when they talk about the roles that a teacher or an adult is “supposed” to play in the student’s life.

This morning, she again mentioned to me how it was challenging for her as a white woman who grew up and lives in the suburbs to navigate teaching the students at the school who come from the city. She has recently joined some kind of diversity committee at the school and she hopes that they will focus primarily on this “issue” since there are many students who come from the city to the suburbs for this school. (Field Notes February 11)

I sometimes noticed that Teacher J seemed a little more uncomfortable in her interactions with Bob when he had behavior incidents than she did when the white child with autism had outbursts. This might be because she saw racial diversity as an “issue.” To what extent do our perceptions that we aren’t the “right” person to discuss or do something get in our own way? I’m not ready to accept that certain students need only certain teachers, or that certain teachers can only teach certain students. The diversity present in every person’s lived experience is so rich that it can’t be possible for a teacher’s identity to fully reflect the identity of her students. Sometimes, the truths involved in discussing race in America are “so painful that it’s tempting to turn away, change the subject, flip the channel, talk about something else, anything else” (Alexander 1). Teacher J did not turn away, but instead had a wonderful proclivity to reflect on how her own identity, fears, and apprehensions shape how she interacted with students.

We also pondered what it must be like for the one black child in the classroom, and whether or not he feels like he is asked to represent an entire identity or culture. I also brought up how the white students in the class might project their assumptions about black people onto him, which seemed to be something that the teacher had not considered. She told me about what it was like to be the only Jewish girl in her class growing up, and how a teacher once asked her if she could tell the class about the Holocaust instead of teaching it himself. (Field Notes February 18)

Here, Teacher J named her own identity and tried to remember how she felt at Bob’s age in her process of reflecting on how Bob’s identity might be affected by his schooling experience. She did not try and pretend she knew what it felt like to be Bob, but rather spoke from what she knew was true: her own experience.

I don’t want my memories of Bob to be damage-based. After all, I had an incredibly enriching experience. The lead teacher was desire-based in her willingness to reflect and improve. In most moments of the day, Bob appeared happy. In my memory, I hope to carry Bob as an example of Tuck’s notion of survivance. Bob’s ability to thrive even in a setting where he was sometimes excluded from playing the recorder illustrates Billings’ reminder that we should try to “learn *from* and not merely *about* African-American students” (76). Ultimately, an excerpt from my field notes on the first day I met Bob and his class illustrates the true beauty I witnessed in the main classroom, albeit not in the music room.

One thing I notice a lot of in this classroom is the teacher giving students a voice and options in how their learning experience will go. For example, at lunch today, she asked the class (after witnessing a lot of scrambling to get lunch seats) “please show me with your fingers (10 being the highest) how stressful you find it getting a seat at lunch.” After the students showed her, they had a whole class conversation in which several students shared their concerns. Even when students interrupt a lesson, the teacher often lets them finish their entire mini-monologue before going back to task. She is so gentle (a healing presence!) that I can’t imagine any of these students not feeling fully supported, listened to, and even loved by her. (Field Notes January 28)

Everyday when I want to QFS, I witnessed Teacher J expressing love for her students. It was this love that prompted her to ask challenging questions and share with me such candid reflections. It is also this love that gives me hope that the project of multicultural education is possible.

I conclude with a philosophical puzzle, as seems fitting for Education. Does intention cause actions? Or is the intention of an act realized only through that action? This is a question my philosophy-major friend considered for her thesis. Does the intention to flip the light switch exist before the light is switched on? Or, is it only when we *see* the light that we fully understand the actor’s intention to give that light? The difference here is small, yet feels important when thinking about educators intending to teach one way, yet acting in a way that might communicate a different intention.  Where was my intention in visiting Quaker Fun School? If we understand intention as my reflective stance *before* I entered the school, then my intention was not to make some evaluative statement as to the presence of micro-aggressions or the treatment of students of color. If my intentions can only be seen in my *actions*, however, then my intention was to pay close attention to Bob, as this is what was realized through my action of writing field notes. Ultimately, I hope that my future actions will express the intention of an educator who is mindful of how learning spaces feel for students like Bob. In *Professional Actions Echo Personal Experience,* Chia-lin Huang insightfully conveys the way in which moments and people shape future professional actions:

I am deliberate in my efforts to make theory and practice reflect each other, to ‘see’ and ‘hear’ my personal experiences in my professional behaviors. These echoes are hallmarks of my multicultural becoming. (170)

My memory of Bob will be with me as I become a multicultural educator; I hope that my professional behaviors and actions will reflect the impactful lessons I learned both from the real Bob with whom I read books and discussed Legos and from the “Bob” of my imagination, who entered my mind throughout the semester and prompted me to consider difficult but important questions. Bob, I believe, is one hallmark of my own multicultural becoming.

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