

An Interrogation of the “If Only” Mentality: One Teacher’s Deficit Perspective put on Trial

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Abstract In this article, I interrogate a previous and harmful “If Only” mindset I held as an early childhood literacy teacher. I describe the “If Only” mentality as the idea that if only the parents and families of the students I taught changed, schools and teachers could serve their children better. This deficit way of thinking led to a number of mistakes I made as a still-new, white, middle-class, monolingual Reading Recovery teacher who was unprepared to value the home and community literacies of a population of students and families from linguistic, cultural, and economic backgrounds other than my own.

Keywords Socio-cultural theory · Early childhood literacy · Critical theory · Sociology · Parent-teacher workshops

In the summer of 2004, I applied for a state funded grant to put on a “Parent University” once a month at the elementary school where I taught as a reading teacher. I hoped to provide seminars to kindergarten and first grade parents to share ways they could support their children as readers and writers. My desire to provide this opportunity for parents was both sincere and presumptuous—I genuinely wanted to share the knowledge I had gained in my studies of theories of language and literacy in preservice and inservice teacher training programs, and I assumed that the parents of the students I taught lacked knowledge of ways to support their children’s growing literacies. I carried what I refer to now as an “If Only” mentality: If Only parents

knew how important it was to read to children multiple times a day in loving and playful contexts, If Only parents understood how crippling the popular strategy “sound it out” is to emerging readers, If Only parents provided authentic reading and writing experiences at home and relied less on workbooks and worksheets to supplement the curriculum in school. If Only... If Only... If Only....

The theoretical base for my “If Only” philosophy was not unfounded. My thinking was grounded by decades of research in the field of language and literacy that demonstrate the power of side by side reading experiences at home (Butler 1998; Doake 1985; Durkin 1966; Teale 1984; Teale and Sulzby 1986). My ideas were also supported by Holdaway’s (1979) research that introduced teachers to the idea of shared reading, or the bedtime story brought to classrooms as a structure for capturing what organically occurs when a parent and a child interact around text. This research gave further credibility to the bedtime story as an important part of emerging literacy. In addition, my ideas were supported by parent and grandparent studies that document with detail the ways children nearly effortlessly learn to read and write when literacy engagements are purposeful and when tools for reading and writing are available in the home (Bissex 1980; Campbell 2004; Martens 1996). These studies paralleled similar research in language acquisition that uncovered how children learn oral language when conditions are supportive (Cambourne 1987) and language use is functional (Halliday 2001). Pioneers of the whole language movement (e.g., Ken and Yetta Goodman) as well as prominent researchers in psychology such as Marie Clay (1998) discovered that children rely on phonics as a resource, not the driving mechanism, to make sense of print. These and other scholars extended this idea by demonstrating that phonics is best taught in larger chunks connected to real reading

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and writing rather than isolated units divorced from meaningful texts (Clay 1993, 1998; Goswami and Bryant 1990; Moustafa 1997; Smith 1997).

I wrapped up all that theory that I knew, cradled it in the statistics of my school by documenting high poverty rates and depressing test scores and submitted the grant application. When the grant was funded, I bought dozens of copies of the parent-friendly text, *Reading Magic* (Fox 2001), to share to illustrate the power of reading aloud with young children. I bought packages of leveled texts to give to the parents to distribute after demonstrations on how to choose books that were “just right” for emerging readers (Routman 2000) and bookmarks with prompts parents could use when their children got stuck on tricky words. I bought magnetic letters to give away following a discussion of how readers use chunks of letters to best help them “break” textual codes (Wilson 2002). I bought and shared these resources because I assumed the parents did not have them or the knowledge base to know how to use them.

Harmful “Good” Intentions

On the first Parent University night, more than a dozen parents trickled in for the evening. After that, fewer and fewer came each month. By the end of year, I felt defeated because only a couple of loyal parents regularly came. Contextualized in a school district where many instructional leaders held negative assumptions about parents oppressed by poverty, both reflected in and fueled by staff development workshops that reified negative stereotypes (i.e., “The parents of poor students don’t value education” and “Parents of poor students will spend money on nice cars but not on books”), I was never encouraged to think critically about why Parent University had been a flop. It was far too easy to excuse the lack of success as further evidence that the parents of the children I taught did not care. Some of my colleagues, even one of my administrators, responded with disgust at the dismal turnout of parents and some simultaneously rewarded themselves for the difficult “missionary” work we did as educators in a largely poor, predominately African American, failing school setting.

Looking back, I intuitively knew there were things I did not understand about the failure of Parent University. I did not know exactly what they were but I remembered a professor at Emory University who taught an undergraduate course of mine saying that she had taught thousands of middle school aged children in the heart of downtown Atlanta, a part of the city known for poverty and a host of other social ills, and had never once met a parent that didn’t care. I knew my students’ parents and families cared too. But without further knowledge to explain why I couldn’t

seem to reach them through Parent University, it was impossible to gain a more complete picture of how I was perpetuating a cycle of oppression and failure among the students I wanted to see succeed. I believe the reasons parents did not attend those evenings were far more complex than I understood at that time and my approach to “parent involvement,” both pompous and trite, was a large part of its failure.

An Interrogation Begins

While I do not look back on this grant implementation with complete clarity five years after its occurrence, I do look back with some insight gained from two years of continuing my studies in a Language and Literacy doctoral program. This insight has been largely informed by lessons I have learned from the three fields of study that have most influenced my thinking—socio-cultural theory, sociology, and critical theory. These lessons can be applied to my experience with Parent University to shed light on the ways I unknowingly acted out a common script used by privileged educators of children of Color and of children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds—a script that validated my own dominance while I routinely marginalized those I intended to serve.

Socio-cultural Perspectives

I understand now that literacy does not exist in select homes and among select families. The pervasive image of literacy defined as a mother and child (typically white and middle class) cuddled together reading bedtime stories—the image that dominated my prior understanding—is only a fraction of what constitutes literacy learning (Gregory et al. 2004). Literacies in many forms exist in every home and within every community in the world (Gee 1996; Street 1995), and are developed by interactions with not only parents, but grandparents, siblings and community members as well. As human beings, we are always in the process of becoming more fully literate (Martens 1996) in our own social and cultural worlds through our interactions with meaningful others (Vygotsky 1978). When teachers understand these ideas, they can begin to look for the literacies that *already exist* among their students and use them as foundational to literacy instruction in school. Looking for literacy in students’ lives, which can also be called “literacy digs” (Flint 2008) can be done in a myriad of ways (home visits with the intent on learning from children and families, taking pictures of environmental print in the home worlds of children, helping children use their social worlds as the source of poetry and art in school,

etc.) but foundational to all of these strategies is getting to know children and their families through authentic relationship building. Researchers who provide an excellent example of how to actualize these ideas are Gonzalez et al. (2005). This research team identifies the cultural bodies of knowledge that families possess as “funds of knowledge” (p. ix). Through their work, teachers who previously had somewhat limited views of the literacy knowledge of their students—largely a Latino population—became researchers in the homes of students in search of those resources. Once there, these teacher researchers realized that students and their families were skilled and literate in ways that had not been recognized and built upon in school.

It is important to understand that funds of knowledge should not be trivialized to simply “information” but rather to encompass the networks of support in children’s lives that include multiple ways of interacting, learning and teaching (Gregory et al. 2004). Home and community ethnographies (Compton-Lilly 2003; Haight and Carter-Black 2004; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 1988; Valdés 1996) document with detail the rich resources that exist in homes and communities and among the cultural practices of those who live there. These can be tapped and used in schools as a mechanism for validating children’s lives and making instruction in school more meaningful (Nieto 1999, 2002). Educators who embrace the lessons of socio-cultural theories are willing to look beyond their own definitions of literacy to consider all of the students they teach as uniquely, culturally, and socially literate beings.

Applying these theoretical understandings to the failure of Parent University, it becomes clear that I did not recognize and value the home literacies of the students and families at my school and I did not consider the literacy teachers in their homes beyond parents. Nor did I recognize all I could have learned from them. I saw myself as the teacher, the beholder of knowledge and the parents of my students as the passive recipients of the knowledge I was willing to share. My views were deficit. I only recognized my students and their families for who I thought they weren’t, not who they were. The ways I defined literacy were based on understandings from research which had largely ignored literacy learning in multiple cultural contexts. Had I known my parents deeply as social and cultural human beings I may have realized there were rich literacy practices with which my students and their families were already familiar. What were those literacies, I now wonder. Storytelling with extended family? Singing and preaching in church? Cooking and sharing family recipes? Because I did not build authentic relationships in the homes and communities of the students I taught, I will never know. And, because I did not see that my definition of literacy (i.e., a bedside story and the writing of thank you notes) as one of *many* ways literacy is actualized, I missed

opportunities I could have used as a teacher to bridge the rich literacies that existed in my students’ lives with the dominant literacies, or language of power (Delpit 2006) used in schools. In addition, I never knew if my assumptions that the families did not practice school style literacy were founded. If I had I crossed cultural boundaries and entered the lives of the students I taught, I could have discovered, like Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) in an ethnography into the lives of marginalized children living in inner city poverty, that there were traditional literacy practices explored at home (i.e., reading aloud, reading and writing letters, grocery lists, etc.), practices that I assumed did not exist because I assumed school failure would not exist if they did. In these harmful and traditional definitions of what constituted literacy success, I overlooked ways I could have mined rich resources. I also overlooked that the reasons some children do not succeed in school are much more complex and nuanced than I had assumed and that these reasons are deeply rooted in racism and classism.

Sociological Perspectives

While sociocultural perspectives offer an avenue for building on the richness of the literacies that exist in our students lives, I have also learned that we should be cautious about focusing so narrowly on finding student resources that we fail to address that there are broader social ills, rooted in racism and classism, that can negatively impact students’ opportunities as learners, leaving imprints on their academic track record. Focusing on bridging home and school gaps for children at school while ignoring the structures that have historically and systematically oppressed some students excuses us from questioning the system of oppression in which we play a part. Economic and racial inequalities in our country are not happenstance, and it is valuable to understand poverty and racism from a historical and sociological perspective. For example, we currently operate in a governmental system that has set a poverty line based on ideas from English magistrates in 1795, a system that punishes the poor for being poor (Books 2004). Since persons of Color are three times as likely as whites to be living in poverty in the United States (Children’s Defense Fund 2008), it is essential that race and racism are brought front and center in our discussions of poverty. In some inner city, predominantly African American neighborhoods (i.e., Chicago), poverty stems from restrictions on the number of mortgages given in Black communities after World War Two, forcing African Americans into inner city neighborhoods where jobs were fleeting, resources were scarce, and segregation was enforced by the building of physical barriers (i.e., highways) to separate them from suburban

neighborhoods (Wilson 1996). In education, these racist policies have continued in court case after court case that denied funding to schools across the country in most need of financial resources, most often schools that serve children of Color (Books 2004; Kozol 2005). In many schools, children are further racially and economically segregated while inside school walls by policies that enforce academic tracking (Oakes 2005). Therefore, contrary to what we believe about schools being the “great equalizers” between the rich and poor, they are instead examples of our “Savage Inequalities” (Kozol 1992). Books (2004) writes that these “disparities were not random, but rather clearly patterned, predictable, and consequential” (p. 63). Understanding the myth of meritocracy, or the idea that with hard work everyone in our country can succeed, is a critical component in understanding schools. With unequal and inequitable access to economic advantages, we must recognize that there are challenges faced by children who are born into economically disadvantaged backgrounds and children who are born of Color that white middle class children will probably not face (MacLeod 2009).

I explore these ideas because poverty and race *do* matter in our society. In my state of South Carolina, there is a large percentage of rural, uninsured, low-income families; the state also has one of the highest teen birth and infant mortality rates in the nation (Children’s Defense Fund 2008). In fact, uninsured children are a growing trend across the nation: Recent statistics demonstrate that there are 8.9 million uninsured children living in the United States (Children’s Defense Fund 2008). This is true despite the fact most poor children have working adults in the home. Lack of public transportation exacerbates the unemployment rate, as well as access to health care (South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center 2005). According to The Children’s Defense Fund (2007), “That children are dying from tooth abscesses and from conditions exacerbated by bureaucratic barriers and bungling is a national disgrace.... The lottery of birth should not dictate child survival” (p. 4). While employment rates and access to health care are decreasing, there is an increasing number of incarcerations, especially among African American males. *America’s Cradle to Prison Pipeline* (The Children’s Defense Fund 2007) report states:

The most dangerous place for a child to try to grow up in America is at the intersection of poverty and race. That a Black boy born in 2001 has a 1 in 3 chance...of going to prison is a national disaster. (p. 4)

The “prison pipeline” starts early: In many schools across the nation, African American boys are overrepresented in in-school suspension and office referrals, but this fact is rarely examined within the larger backdrop of structural oppression. We focus in socio-cultural theories on

extracting the rich funds of knowledge from families (for which each family has many); however, it is imperative that we do not overlook how race and class in a racist and classist society can negatively affect the educational vita of our students. For some students, life provides challenges that schools overlook or simply refuse to recognize.

Applying this broader sociological lens to Parent University, I realize there were social factors I did not account for when providing my “services.” Many families were working multiple jobs to make ends meet, making time in the evenings limited. With access to health care not available to some of the families we served, I wonder now how many of the perceived “reading problems” my students faced were physiological. Could they have been caused by my students needing glasses or hearing aids that they could not afford? I clearly remember students who did not have access to these resources even though they had been identified by the school nurse through screening procedures as potentially needing them. I also did not consider how transportation, which was often a barrier for the families I worked with, could have decreased attendance at Parent University. I did not consider how important it was for my African American male students and their families to learn from men of Color, potentially fostering the building of positive Black identities, rather than leaning from yet another white teacher. Furthermore, while I assumed the parents I worked with wanted to be partners with me in their child’s school experiences, some research has documented that families with fewer economic means often consider education the job of educators (Lareau 2000, 2003). While trends in society cannot solely explain every individual or group, we cannot ignore that research has shown there are stresses in homes where families struggle to simply survive. In what ways was I sensitive to what these stresses may have been? The answer is quite clear—I was not sensitive at all. I routinely imposed what I felt were reasonable expectations for participation based on my own white, middle class norms without considering the challenges my students’ parents and families may have faced.

Critical Perspectives

Although the term hegemony can seem mystical or even university-ish, its theoretical underpinnings are quite simple and useful for teachers. Originated from Gramsci (1971), hegemony is the idea that one social group can rule over another by perpetuating its values as reflecting universal ideologies, as being the “norm” for all. While these norms are professed to benefit everyone, in actuality they only keep power in the hands of the ruling class. When the ways of being of people who hold power are seen as the “right” ways of being and everyone else’s ways are seen as

subordinate, dominant classes protect their power. With media images and textual materials of all kinds created largely by those of dominant classes and races, it is easy to push ruling agendas as the superior ones. Bourdieu (as cited in MacLeod 2009) encourages us to think about the ways of being, or habitus, of the ruling classes as reproduced from generation to generation, enabling their hold on positions of power. Habitus can be exchanged for cultural capital, or cultural privileges, that are rewarded in schools, the workforce, and governing institutions. For instance, if a child is born into a privileged social group, she learns the interactional styles of those in that group (also known as a form of cultural capital), making her entre into a world that rewards those interactional styles much easier than it would be for a child not socialized the same way. In schools, students with cultural capital, or those who norms, languages, and values most clearly match those of school, generally make successful transitions. Those without the cultural capital rewarded in schools are often positioned as being oppositional to school style norms and values. Through these theoretical lenses, we more clearly see how schools perpetuate social inequality. While it may be difficult to understand why those with power would ever want relinquish it to strive for true social justice, Friere (1970) sheds light on the idea that both the oppressed and the oppressor are victims of oppression. Because the oppressor dehumanizes others, she is also dehumanized herself. I believe these concepts can be used to provide a framework for interrogation of my own practice.

As I consider my study of critical theory in relation to my teaching in general and to my attempts to teach families through Parent University in particular, I realize that I was perpetuating my own dominance at every turn. I learned in my Reading Recovery training program to listen to children read with the precision and analytical detail of a detective looking for the missing piece of information that would be used to solve a mystery. I spent countless hours during the school day and beyond poring over students' Running Records trying to make sense of my notes taken on errors children made while reading without considering how my choices in texts could have impacted their abilities to make sense of them. My students were mostly African American, yet the hundreds of books displayed in book baskets in my room rarely reflected their backgrounds. When I ordered books, I ordered them to fill the gaps in text levels, not the gaps in representations of my students. The very test used to determine who would qualify for services reflected a cultural bias with its near exclusion of children of color and its insistence on one discourse style—a middle class white one. For instance, when my students made grammatical “errors” while reading, it was counted against them even though the rules they operated by were perfectly consistent with the syntax of their home

languages (Boutte 2008). Sitting side by side with a teacher who evaluated reading success by her language alone was a disservice to my students.

The weight of oppression must have felt palpable. My students must have wondered, as Sonia Nieto (2009) did as a Puerto Rican-American child growing up in New York in the 1950s, “Where are the books and the languages that reflect me?” I was sending the message to my students that their histories and their lives did not matter. I considered the mind and the text every day but I rarely thought about how culture, power and marginalization intersected the transaction between the two. I missed so many opportunity to affirm the lives of my students. As Rudine Sims Bishop (2007) writes:

African American children’s literature can be affirming for children who have historically not found affirmation in classroom materials. It can also connect with other children of color whose life experiences in this society are tainted by the poison of racism and often marked by struggle. (p. xiv)

I did not adhere to this advice, however, as I only considered psychological, not cultural, conceptions of matching children and books.

This oppression extended far beyond books used in my classroom. There were other ways my students were marginalized at my school. For instance, there were few African American teachers and no African American male teachers, who could have affirmed the identities of my students. As national trends demonstrate, many of the white teachers at my school, including myself, were not adequately prepared to teach diverse students. The language of school—Standard English—did not carve a space for valuing African American Language or Spanish, both spoken by a large percentage of our students. In what must have come in shock waves, our students and families were routinely hit with Eurocentrism—Eurocentric values, Eurocentric norms, Eurocentric languages, Eurocentric histories—in newsletters, books, interactions, governing rules, etc.

Using this critical lens, I reflect once more on Parent University. The book I gave away at the first event, *Reading Magic* (Fox 2001), told story after brilliant story of children reading books written in Standard English by mostly white authors. Many contributors to my theoretical constructions of literacy had researched in white, middle class contexts. The leveled text sets I bought to distribute did not reflect the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of my students. By pushing materials, assessments and curriculum onto my students and their families that represented my world alone, I failed to hear words from their worlds. In other words, I took their points of view away from them by not carving a space in my curriculum for

their existence. As Friere (1970) writes, “Those who steal the words of others develop a deep doubt in the abilities of the others and consider them incompetent” (p. 129). Looking back, I know it is true that I doubted the abilities of my students.

It was a classic case of hegemony—my values were imposed on the students I taught as being the best values to have. I assumed they would benefit all of my students while failing to see they merely protected my own position of privilege. And, because the cultural capital of my students did not match what the school rewarded, I failed to see that my students were up against odds before the first day they entered into our educational institution. Like my students, I was oppressed by my own system of oppression. Seen through Friere’s (1970) ideas of dialogism, or coming to understand others through conversations fueled by genuine respect, humility and love, even though I *thought* I was being respectful, humble, and loving, it is clear I missed opportunities to work with my students and their families to overcome the bridles of oppression.

Conclusion

Through introspection gained by more life experiences and shaped by learning in a graduate program, I now more clearly understand how my insensitivity and unquestioned privilege marginalized the students I taught and their families. I do not expose my reflections on Parent University to demonstrate feelings of regret. Rather, I reflect with gratitude that I have now gained some insight on why and how I failed my students and their families. Now that I know better, I can do better. I now teach pre-service early childhood teachers on-site at a local elementary school. My undergraduate students work with partner first graders and, together, we make learning to know students and families and their community a foundational part of our course by going on “literacy digs” (Flint 2008) in the rural area our school is located, getting to know parent and community representatives to learn about their funds of knowledge, creating environmental print word walls, and using photography as a tool to understand our young learners’ social and cultural worlds. While building from students’ home worlds in school, we do not overlook that some of the students we work with in my courses face real struggles as rural students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, such as finding transportation to quality after-school care programs and living in temporary housing. Nor do we accept the perpetuation of Eurocentric values often dominant in curricular resources—we carefully examine books, assessments and other curricular materials we use for representation of our students and try to make curricular

decisions that challenge, rather than maintain, the status quo of the “If Only” mentality.

As I more deeply understand what teaching for social justice means, I am energized by all there is ahead of me to learn. Menninger (2009) writes, “Unrest of spirit is a mark of life; one problem after another presents itself and in the solving of them we can find our greatest pleasure.” Sometimes I question if problem solving really brings pleasure. However, we have no choice. As long as problems exist, trying to solve them is the only option we have. Quite simply, there is great work to be done and early childhood teachers and teacher educators cannot turn their back on the lessons of our past as we move forward for the young teachers and learners in our lives.

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