Growing Up Black Essay, Research Paper

Paper presentation at Stanford University”Multiculturalism and Institutions”Spring 1991Tawn Arlenia Wims GROWING UP BLACK As Molly pointed out, culture is not limited to ethnicity. However, in the school environment, ethnicity should be validated and explored in a positive manner.I taught a junior English class at Casa Grande High school in Petaluma, Sonoma County. The student population is predominately European Anglo-Saxon, with less than 1% of students of color. As a graduate of Casa Grande, I was familiar with the ethnic make-up of the campus. But ironically, somehow I had forgotten that when I was in high school, most of my peers could not relate to my ethnicity. My amnesia quickly left and my memory came back full force when I began teaching a unit on Richard Wright’s novel, Native Son. As a young, idealistic credential candidate, I came out of college excited and eager to share my knowledge. In college I had been exposed to sensitive, stimulating and thought provoking literature from a variety of cultures. Through my reading and class discussions, I gained a deeper understanding of the experiences that shaped the various ethno-groups around me. This strengthened my cultural sensitivity and tolerance. I felt and believed that by sharing literature like this with my students, they would have the same reaction to it as I did. I came to my classroom ready to re-create the learning atmosphere of my college literature courses. Now, to give myself a little credit, I realized that the concepts and ideas presented in the novel Native Son were going to be difficult for my students to understand without some background information. I did my best to prepare them. I showed my class educational films with titles such as Black History: Lost, Stolen Or Strayed. I showed them a contemporary film “Ragtime” where a young, talented and articulate African-American, Coalhouse Walker, Jr., took his rage and frustration to the limit and murdered several Anglo-Saxon firemen in response to a vicious practical joke. I read to my students countless narratives, short stories and poetry from prestigious African-American authors such as Dick Gregory, Gwendolyn Brooks and Toni Cade Bambara. I developed study questions designed to promote critical thinking and help the students to understand the reactions of the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, by relating them to experiences of their own. Boy was I surprised when, several weeks after the start of this unit, one of my students told me that he didn’t understand my question “How are the rhythms of Bigger’s life symbolic of the black struggle for equality against the oppression of racism in America?” “How am I supposed to know?” he asked disgustedly. I was shocked. I thought that I had done such a careful job. In retrospect, I see my error. I expected my students to have developed, in 4 short weeks, the same insights into material that I had studied intensively for at least two years. Once I got passed my frustration and disillusionment with the learning capacity of high school students, I began to take a critical look at the students with whom I was working. I realized that the reason they couldn’t understand my question was because they had not had the background knowledge necessary for them to relate. I had failed to provide the experiences they needed to allow them to empathize with the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, and African-Americans in general. But that is another issue.I thought back to a paper I had delivered to a group of junior high school teachers at Cooke junior high in Santa Rosa, in November 1990. I was asked to be a guest speaker, talking about the African-American students on campus in an attempt to help the educators decrease ethnocentricism, and develop in their students an appreciation of multi-cultural diversity. By relating some of my experiences being raised in Sonoma County, I hoped to help the teachers develop a better understanding of the African-American students on their campus. I believe that some of that paper deserves repeating here. As a starting point, I think it is important to take a critical look at the terminology we use when describing the various ethno-groups in America. I believe we need to stay away from using terms such as black and white when describing people. The connotations that arise when these terms are employed have too many nuances of meaning. Black usually suggests darkness, evil, ugliness; while white suggests purity, goodness and light. When describing ethnic origin, using terms such as African-American, Chinese-American, Mexican-American and so forth helps to create a shared sense of belonging to the United States. The surname is “American”, the African, Chinese, Mexican, etc. is the first name. We are all in the same family.It is crucial that students be exposed to a variety of literature which represents the diverse backgrounds of the different ethnic groups in our culture. As observed in the book Caught in the Middle, the students “study of history, geography, science, mathematics, and the arts should allow them to discover the contributions of famous individuals of varied ethnic and linguistic backgrounds who have helped to give our society its rich cultural heritage.”In school, I was not taught about the positive contributions of my African-American ancestors. In my history books, what I did learn about my heritage was limited. My history books glorified the conquest of America by the Europeans as something to be proud of, causing me to believe that the history of the Anglo-Saxons was good, and the history of African-Americans was something of which I should be ashamed. I learned that my ancestors were brought over here on slave ships, kidnapped, chained and packed into the holds of ships like sardines packed into a can. I learned that the Africans were treated as animals, denied basic human rights, while simultaneously I was taught that America was land of the free, and home of the brave. Never was anything positive taught to me about my ethno-group in the classrooms.My positive images of African-Americans came to me via my mother. It was she who taught me that the first man to shed blood in the Revolutionary war was Crispus Attucks, an African-American. It was my mother who told me about Harriet Tubman, the wonderful brave woman who ran the underground railroad that helped so many of those unfortunate souls escape from the insanity of slavery. She told me how clever the African-American slaves were in helping each other to escape; how the songs they sang, or the rhythms they beat out on their drums often had hidden messages describing where to go or whether the coast was clear to escape. My mother told me the sad story of Daniel Hale Williams, the African-American man who discovered how to use blood transfusions to save lives, and how his life was lost because he was refused treatment in an Anglo-Saxon hospital. She taught me that my African heritage was rich in music, poetry, and the oral tradition. With passion in her voice she told that in fact, there were colleges in Africa when the rest of the world was still in caves. My mother taught me to be proud of who I was. In addition to sharing the triumphs of my African-American ancestors, my mother also told me of their pain and suffering. She told me of some of her experiences growing up in Roanoke Virginia. She told me how she could not try on clothes or hats in the department stores. She told me of how she had to ride in the backs of buses, even though she paid the same fare as the Anglo-Saxons. To my mother’s credit, she managed to tell me of these things without bitterness. She merely stated it as a matter of fact. She taught me how to hold my head up high, in the face of adversity, and to strive for excellence. She always told me how bright and intelligent I was, which made me feel special. When it came to dealing with racial slurs, (like being called nigger), my mother had the answer. She told me that my name was Tawn, and that was the only name to which I should answer.

But even with the positive teachings of my mother at home, I still remember feelings of inferiority and self-hatred because my skin was dark, because my eyes weren’t blue, because I straightened my hair with a hot comb. These were things that my peers could not understand. Whoopi Goldberg captured these feelings perfectly in her comedy routine entitled “A One Woman Show.” She performs a piece in which she is a seven-year-old African-American girl, coming to terms with the fact that she operates within two cultures. The child is introduced to us with her jacket on her head. She tells us that it is her long, blonde, luxurious hair. She can swing it back and forth, it blows in the wind, and everyone thinks it is absolutely beautiful. But when the child stops pretending and takes off her jacket, what is left is a head of hair that is short, dark and nappy. It doesn’t move, it isn’t luxurious, and “when [she] tried bouncin’ and behavin’ shampoo, her hair wouldn’t even listen.” When the wind blew through the hair of my white classmates, their hair gently floated up and gracefully cascaded back down. When the wind blew through my hair, it stayed up. My hair was not beautiful. My real appreciation and respect for my African-American heritage began when I went to Sonoma State University. It was in college that I began to get the other story, the one that told history in such a way that called into question the belief structures and practices that the Anglo-Saxons used to colonize America. Here was the place where the education I had received at home finally began to match the one I now received at school. I began reading literature from a variety of cultures, including the African-American culture. Suddenly, my background and my history had meaning. Proudly, I could contribute important information to class discussions, information that no one else had because no one else was an African-American. I could talk about my experiences in an open democratic atmosphere, where the sole purpose of the dialogue was to gain a deeper understanding of the literature at hand. No longer could I unconditionally admire and respect the “supposed” forefathers of my country. The literature I read dramatically altered my opinions. I read slave narratives that made me weep with revulsion as I read eye-witness accounts of people being whipped, burned, mutilated, and killed, and legally so, because they were considered the property of another human being. I read poetry that clearly and painfully illuminated the confusion of being young, gifted and black in a culture that did not recognize your humanity. I read short stories and novels that beautifully described feelings and emotions I had, but did not the experience or thoughts to express them.I also learned about people like W.E.B. DuBois, Frances Harper, and Zora Neale Hurston, people who told my story, and told it well. From these authors, I not only learned what life had been like for my African-American ancestors, I also developed a clearer vision of what life could yet be like. By reading about their trials and pilgrimages through life, I realized how important it was for me to do my best in life. I saw the obstacles that these people had overcome and it made me want to desperately succeed. It was my duty, my destiny, a gift that had been passed down to me from the forefathers of the African-American history. Something of which I could be proud. When relating to the students of color on your campus, there are important points to remember. First and foremost, before anything else, remember that they are young people who need your guidance and support. They have the same fears and desires of the every student on the campus. They go through the same embarrassments over puberty, they think the older generation doesn’t have a clue, they think that they have all of the answers to life’s questions. They need to feel important, they need to feel that their life has meaning. As teachers we must all work hard to learn as much as we can about the values and morals of the various ethno-groups that we teach. We need to show our students that we are willing to discuss and learn about the things that make them unique, things like family life, history and ethnocentricity. I believe this can be accomplished through the use of literature.Speaking specifically about African-Americans, along with the authors I have mentioned above, there are many authors that are writing wonderful contemporary literature. Authors like Toni Morrison with her novels such as Sula, Beloved and The Bluest Eye. Toni Cade Bambara has a wonderful book of short stories, titled Gorilla My Love, which are little vignettes of African-American life. And then there is Walter D. Myers, who has written novels such as Hoops, Won’t Know Til I Get There, and The Young Landlords, to name a few. Texts such as these help to illuminate African-American family life in all aspects. I can’t tell you the thrill it gave me to read in Gorilla My Love a reference to the magical qualities of rain water, and to remember that sometimes my mother had put me put buckets out to catch the rain.I have heard and seen the statistics on the African-American youth in this country. The findings are pretty grim. There are more African-American males in prison than there are in college. African-American females have had, by percentage, more babies than any other ethno-group. The papers and the television tell me that there are more African-American youth in gangs. And they are giving the African-American students on your campus the same message. What I don’t see plastered all over the front page is the positive things about African-Americans. I don’t see equal time being given to the authors and the poets and the educators. And neither do the students on your campus. So it is up to you, it is up to me, it is up to anyone concerned with fostering positive self-image amongst the children that we teach, that we give them the positive images and role models.Teachers must examine their own values, prejudices, knowledge and background experiences in relationship to their students. We need to develop a network of communication between ourselves and community organizations in order to develop resources that provide all students with the images and role models they need. Growing up black in Sonoma County was not a terrible experience for me. But growing up African-American would have been much better. Questions to Consider: What if people do not accept the cultural model? How are ways that someone can insist upon the freedom to be who they are? 1. passive resistance2. avoidance 3. civil disobedience4. political action

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