

Windows and Mirrors: Creating Reflective and Inclusive Classrooms

Christopher Avery

Director of Community, The Haverford School, Haverford, Penn.

13 years' teaching experience

SEED New Leaders' Week 2007

Essay written 2013

Often when I reflect on my SEED journey, I think about my first time as a SEED participant. While there were many impactful moments, few encapsulated my SEED transformation as much as Emily Style's 1988 article, "[Curriculum as Window and Mirror](#)." This article says that all curricula should provide mirrors for students, in which they can see themselves reflected, and windows, through which they can look into the lives and stories of people who are different. I grew up in an under-resourced section of Washington, D.C. as the child of a loving mother who worked for the U.S. Post Office and an incarcerated father. He was originally arrested when I was very young and currently is still serving his sentence. It is with that backdrop that I entered private school at sixth grade.

At the time, I had little understanding of the complexities of microaggressions and stereotype threat. I only understood that my jacket was different than those of the majority of my peers and their cars looked very different as well. During my first year at the school, I quickly saw how dissimilar my new school was from the urban public school I had left. I specifically remember thinking that the *Mayflower* must have been a massive ship, as the majority of my peers claimed, during our family tree project, that they traced their lineage back to its storied voyage. Considering that my family "roots" abruptly stopped at a plantation in North Carolina, I felt yet another source of difference which seemed to embody my overall transition to the school.

I originally came to the school with the hope of finding a better education. Unfortunately, I learned many things beyond the textbooks that have helped shape my teaching today. I learned about feelings of inadequacy and the perception of having to carry the load of an entire race on my shoulders. I felt ashamed of my home, as I wrongly compared it to the monstrous mansions of my peers. I felt particularly embarrassed by my father's plight, which failed to match the lofty careers of my classmates' fathers. Throughout this experience, I constantly overlooked the myriad strengths I brought to the school, specifically to the curriculum. Generally, I felt that I did not belong and was an unwanted guest.

In retrospect, I can only imagine how different my experience would have been if I could have seen myself reflected in the curriculum. I imagine a 12-year-old version of myself sitting in class learning about early United States history. However, while looking through the endless window to the differences that affirmed the majority of my peers, I would have learned about Lewis Lattimore, Granville Woods, Phyllis Wheatley, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Possibly considering my living in Washington, DC, we would have even spent time learning about Benjamin Banneker. I imagine a 12-year-old version of myself finding normalcy in a classroom that in reality never truly felt normal. I

imagine a classroom with pictures of Booker T. Washington and Crispus Attucks standing amongst the vast display of figures that littered my teacher's bulletin board.

Being comforted by those figures could have eased the difficulty of hearing about the great generals of the Civil War and their skillful leaders. I could have felt solace in the balancing of stories, as my peers and I could have witnessed history through the eyes of a slave and a slave owner or a Founding Father and a Free Father.

I have shared these imaginings with colleagues with the hope of illuminating their understanding of inclusive pedagogy. While my story is but a slice of the fabric of "our" story, it is an equally important story. Unfortunately, too much of my educational experience was lost not understanding that vital fact. Consequently, I have worked to provide my students with the opportunity to see as many mirrors as possible within their curriculum and to understand the infinite value of their stories to the continuum of learning within the classroom. Students have brought in family journals and archives, and written histories about their heroes.

I have worked to help my students understand that the story of a distant relative on the *Mayflower* has value equal to that of the story of a recent relative who was the first in the family to graduate from college. Both stories speak of identity. Too many of our students have struggled to find their histories within our classrooms, which is not their responsibility. Rather, it is each educator's duty to provide reflective and inclusive opportunities for all their students.

Providing only mirrors for students limits their intellectual growth. My experiences of a variety of windows greatly informed my educational journey. It was through the study of women's suffrage, the Trail of Tears, the Holocaust, and the sexual identity of Walt Whitman that I grasped a deeper understanding of humanity. As some of my teachers provided limited but occasional peeks into otherness, I better understood James Baldwin's quote that "It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have." Without appreciating otherness, I could not understand myself or my role in working against oppression.

Due to my limited exposure to stories outside of those of the dominant majority, I struggled to see the value of being an ally to other groups. Rather, I understood only my limited representation in the larger continuum of systems of privilege and oppression. Only with greater exposure was I able to understand my complicity in maintaining the systems of oppression. Consequently, I have learned that I must expose my students to myriad voices so that they can better understand their role in the larger system. As Emily stated,

It is limiting and inaccurate to only educate our children provincially when they must live their lives in a global context, facing vast differences and awesome similarities.

Only through continual exposure to a diversity of stories can our students be equipped to skillfully navigate the various communities they will enter. At the heart of education should be the conviction that teaching is a relationship between everyone within the classroom, all of whom learn from each other. This ideal often contradicts the limited paradigm of the instructor and the instructed. Personally, the teachers that most impacted my learning were those who shared their lives with me

and validated the sharing of my life within the course. Nothing created dissonance in my learning more than my feeling disconnected or invalidated by the teacher or members of the class. A community of learners must be formed that allows students to learn from each other. It is through this community that educators will learn more about themselves and be better equipped to teach their students.