

What does whiteness have to do with it?

by Tracey Mollins

On January 28, 2004, a group of literacy workers met at Parkdale Project Read in downtown Toronto to discuss Sue Shore's article "What's Whiteness got to do with it?"

Here are some of our thoughts.

Why are the words white and whiteness are capitalized? It made some of us angry that whiteness was given dominance in an article about white power. Some thought these words are capitalized because they refer to whiteness as a construct beyond just a racial description.

Some authors place themselves that when writing about such topics. They state who they are and what they mean when they use certain terms. Some people felt that if Shore had done this, it would have removed the concerns and questions about the way she uses words and capital letters.

We decided that for this article we wanted to place ourselves. We are nine women ranging in age from early twenties to mid-forties. We all grew up in Canada. Six of us are white and of European descent. One of us is brown and of Aboriginal and European descent. One of us is brown and of South Asian descent. One of us is black and of African descent. All of us have worked in community-based programs. All of us have a post-secondary education. Four of us are full-time university students, one is a part-time student and the rest of us take courses when we can. One of us works at a university and one of us works for this journal. We do not mention class because it is too complex for this short article.

Some people are frustrated that literacy workers are still in the same place they were twenty years ago comes to issues of race and class. Perhaps the discussion has not moved much because, in practice, little has changed.

Perhaps framing the problem as one of whiteness does move the discussion forward. In most anti-oppressive practice, the problem is stated as dealing with diversity - the dominant group has to deal with people from equity-seeking groups. In the way Shore frames it, we look at how people from equity-seeking groups have to deal with the dominant group.

Are we just constructing whiteness and then deconstructing it? What does that mean for practice? By engaging in this theoretical exercise, will practice ever change?

Theory lays the groundwork. As literacy workers, we acknowledge Freire by starting with local, real-life experiences and then connecting them to global issues. Do we find the article difficult because it starts with theory and leaves us to determine how it plays out in our practice?

We talked about how privilege and oppression play out for us in the literacy field. We talked about conferences and who gets to go, research and what gets funded, what gets included in tutor orientation and how the decision to drop anti-oppression sessions is made.

We talked about our own interactions with academic literacy workers and how they make us reflect on our interactions with learners. We respect the efforts of those who try to bridge the difference but feel it is not authentic unless people place themselves and acknowledge their power and privilege. We need to do the same when we work with learners.

How will we address issues of power and whiteness in our practice?

We need to learn more - we will hold a course about power and privilege in literacy. We will trust ourselves to deal with conflict. We acknowledge that everybody is in a different place and that no one is in a perfect place of non-discrimination. We will remember that we learn through kindness.

We ended our meeting with this from Teaching Community by bell hooks:

While it is a truism that every citizen of this nation, white or colored, is born into a racist society that attempts to socialize us from the moment of our birth to accept the tenets of white supremacy, it is equally true that we can choose to resist this socialization. ... Whether or not any of us become racists is a choice we make. And we are called to choose again and again where we stand on the issue of racism at different moments in our lives. This has been especially the case for white people. Few white people make the choice to be fundamentally anti racist and consistently live the meaning of this choice. These are the white folks who know intimately by heart the truth that racism is not in their blood, that it is always about consciousness. And where there is consciousness, there is choice.

(p. 56)