

ON TEACHING[“] THE WORD BLACK,”

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THE psychological potency of the word “black” in our culture is a focal point of formidable problems as today’s classrooms reflect the social crises of our times. With its use, a multitude of conflicting feelings and emotional loadings may emerge which may be difficult to deal with in the classroom.

While politicians and sociologists are considering what is to be done, the teacher is forced to come to grips with the problem instantaneously. Children’s demands are immediate and insistent. The purpose of this paper is to explore a few of the ramifications and dynamics of teaching the word “black” rather than to present answers or methods.

What teacher has not observed the disruptive qualities of the word among black as well as white students? It is invective—“You black, you!” or “Teacher, he’s annoying me. He called me ‘black.’” It is antisocial—“I don’t want to hold her hand. She’s too black.” Indeed, these statements come from black as well as white students.

Emotional Loading

Worse than these disruptive hostilities are some which may not surface as obviously as has been presented here. More tragic for the learner are the reactions of the child to whom the word “black” is a trigger for an inferior self-image. For this child, the word becomes his mental and emotional strait-

jacket which simultaneously lowers his self-esteem and blocks his learning capacity. Incapable of describing this to his teacher or his parents, he may sleep through the day. He may stare helplessly at the learning media, frozen in his immutable black vessel. He has no answer to why he did not do his work. Telling him to try or that he could do better has no meaning for him.

How often teachers have seen black children drawing white, blond people, sullenly rejecting the suggestion of even the slightest bit of color to the skin or hair. The white child too does this, even if his hair is black or brown. Both are building and projecting the blond-nordic-super-beauty image.

Teacher Perspectives

Certainly, the word “black” may be eliminated from spelling lists, from vocabulary development, and passed over lightly in stories. The surface discomfort will consequently be minimized for the teacher and perhaps the students. What teacher has not proceeded in this manner in other troubled areas? A strong disciplinarian may then be able to control the overt expression of the problem.

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However, this will not remove the word from the vocabulary of the children any more than it will affect the society from which the child has come. The literature is replete with studies which insist that ignoring a problem is a temporary stopgap measure forcing the problem into other and sometimes more serious areas.

To proceed as if group differences do not exist is to ignore the cultural context in which children live, for society does not ignore differences. . . . A rule of silence about differences not only fails the child in not helping him to achieve a better understanding than he has of group factors, but the silence may also be perceived by the child as tacit agreement with societal prejudices.¹

The worst case of which I know resulting from ignoring the potency of the word occurred in a junior high school in Brooklyn where the faculty, by and large, preferred to remain aloof from social issues. A newly arrived young girl from Greece called a child "black," which, in her native country, was not considered derogatory. However, it lit a fuse in the tension of another child and the girl was seriously gashed in the face. She needed four stitches.

A sorry way to find a refutation to the old folk saying, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names . . ."

We see children who have to meet the problems of belonging to a minority race. The sociological frictions of this problem are of tremendous complexity. . . . In no part of the whole field of personality adjustment is the individual more helpless, and from no source are there more pressures. . . .²

Black Is Beautiful

Semantically the word "black" is related to evil or bad connotations—blackmail, blackguard, blacklist. Even a "white lie" is less

¹ Marian Radke, Helen G. Trager, and Hadasah Davis. "Social Perceptions and Attitudes of Children." *Genetic Psychological Monographs* 40: 444; 1949.

² James S. Plant. *Personality and the Cultural Pattern*. New York: The Commonwealth Fund, 1937. p. 157.

onerous. Applied to humans, a black is a slave, a servant, or a primitive individual.

Kenneth Clark³ and Mary Ellen Goodman⁴ have demonstrated that in our country even preschool children are aware of the negative meanings of being black. Black is a term of inferiority and rejection, while white refers to superiority and acceptance.

There is a folk song that tells what blackness means to the individual who wants to partake in the American dream of opportunity.

Now if you're white, you're right
But if you're brown, hang around
And if you're black, oh brother
Git back, git back, git back, git back!

Is it any wonder that black power conferences are concerned about changing the meaning of the word black? Or perhaps "change" is the wrong word, adding a new dimension, a new point of view, is more accurate.

Sometimes, in order to avoid trouble, a teacher will deny that a particular child's skin color is black. She may hold up a piece of black construction paper in an attempt to disprove that skin is black. However, this is an oversimplification. It begs the question of whether or not the Negro or African-American child experiences prejudice and discrimination. It certainly does not remove sensitivities. No one need disprove that the so-called "white" child is white. Only when "black" and "white" are both equally acceptable will it be possible to eliminate both terms.

A word of precaution! I do not mean to imply that any child should now be called black. The negative connotations are still great at this point of history; the positive connotations are few. The intention is to introduce positive and new dimensions in order that a child may feel free to choose to be black with self-pride. A child should feel free to call himself Negro, colored, African-American, white, or American without fear of being

³ Kenneth Clark. *Prejudice and Your Child*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.

⁴ Mary Ellen Goodman. *Race Awareness in Young Children*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965.

downgraded. The teacher might conduct a discussion of terms, respecting all. Out of such discussion might come a genuinely meaningful lesson in spelling and vocabulary development.

However, a miracle of transformation could be set into motion by a teacher who presents a spelling list with a new dimension, defining the history of a word in a statement such as "Black is beautiful." Imagine what it would do for the inner life of the nervous eyes watching the black hands holding the yellow crayon.

The awakening learning capacity of the child might seem miraculous to an observer unacquainted with the hidden psychological dynamic; the teacher helped to remove the straitjacket of the negative self-image inherent in the word "black." A restored self-confidence is intimately entwined with the ability to learn.

New Considerations

For the child, the new meaning will require new thoughts, new values, new appraisals. The old cutting-edge and shame will be minimized. A search for a new self-respect will be set into motion. However, the mere introduction of a new theoretical framework does not imply acceptance. Concepts may have to be retold and restated many times. The new concepts will have to be redefined specifically and clearly.

The reactions of the children may not be smooth nor easy to cope with. A sore will have been opened; ugliness may come forth as well. For the child it might be like putting his tongue to a sensitive tooth which the dentist is working on. He may want to say the word, and other words, in a troublesome manner. The teacher should understand this phenomenon in developmental ways similar to what happens when children first explore other emotionally loaded words, for example, in toilet training.

Trust is an important element. The child may question in disbelief, "Teacher, did you say 'Black is beautiful'?" followed by an uncomfortable, self-conscious laugh. Underneath may be the incredulous, "That's not

what I know." The definition may be challenged or disagreed with by both black and white students. The teacher will have to back up the statement to show that she means what she has said. What are the dimensions of the statement, "All children are beautiful," for the teacher?

The Teacher and Sensitivity

Certainly teachers are not immune from the conflicted attitudes which beset the rest of the population in regard to race relations and desegregation.⁵

For the teacher there may be a sensitivity problem. A straightforward handling of a black-white issue might lead to insecure ground. The slight murmur among the children when controversial material is presented might frighten the teacher into avoiding discussion. Often the statement, "I treat all children alike," is the defense that prevents adequate focus upon a problem of treating children as individuals with particular needs.

A discussion with white and black teachers who are open to the implications of this issue would be an invaluable help in crystallizing feelings and concepts. The area of race relations in the United States is developing and progressing. Set ideas and attitudes or an avoidance of them will lead to a rigidity which is anathema to learning.

I have talked to teachers who feel that to say "black is beautiful" implies that "white is not beautiful." Some teachers are afraid that it will lead to a hate-white attitude. However, why should the concept that "you are beautiful" lead to hate? I have never seen a child turn upon me because I filled him with love and self-confidence. The concept that many different things are beautiful—that there is room for diversity in people as there is in nature and in art—does not have one face, one style, one color. The concept of white superiority should be examined as well as the concept of black inferiority and the history of where these attitudes have led our nation.

⁵ Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry. *Psychiatric Aspects of School Desegregation*. New York: GAP, 1957. p. 67.

Once all colors are freely accepted for what they are—pigmentation—we can get to the deeper and more worthwhile values of human beings. Let us of the educational world move academia to the true criteria of judging a book.

Outcomes

Teaching words in a new, positive context is not a cure-all for the problems of the teacher. It will, nevertheless, help to create a more secure learning situation and serve to counteract the black child's introjection of

racial inferiority feelings as well as the white child's false ideas of white superiority. A tool will be provided to probe classroom hostilities and alienation. Communication among the students and between the teacher and the class may be deepened. Further insights and sensitivities will be stimulated.

Pictures of "beautiful" men, women, and children of varied colors and ethnic origins might be used. Perhaps, on a "Beauty Shelf" in the corner of some classroom, a piece of ebony will lie side by side with a piece of white marble below a sign, "Black and white are beautiful." □

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