



VOICES

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Promoting A Dialogue
for Change

Reflection, Retrospection, and Diversity

By Maria L. Manning, Angela Tuttle Prince,
Brenda Bassingthwaite, and Susan Skees Hermes

One of the top three “why” questions asked in Google’s search engine of 2020 was “Why was George Floyd arrested?” (Southern, 2020). The top “why” question, however, was “why were chainsaws invented?” While much of the country may be wondering what reasons led to the invention of the chainsaw, it is more interesting that fewer people inquired about an awakening that pushed the country to reconsider racism, diversity, and social justice. The protests during the Summer of 2020 and the controversial transition of presidential power are reminders of deep-seeded challenges in our society. We are at a crossroads in our society that demands we craft a lens to talk to each other in ways that foster a sense of connection and integrate diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences.

As communities become more diverse, society continues to grapple with complex viewpoints

We need to continue to work on an individual level, shaping our own dialogue, identifying our own biases, and promoting our own changes.



which contradict our willingness for change (Horowitz, 2019). The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO, 2013) expressed the need for personal growth that matches the surge of diversity in schools. Educators should recognize experiences, backgrounds, talents, languages, cultures, and community values that their students bring to the classroom. This can be challenging as we continue to have a predominately white educator workforce with 80% of graduating teacher cohorts from around the United States identifying as White (United States Department of Education, 2016). Research also reports both a resistance to and fatigue from talking about race (Sleeter, 2017). However, following George Floyd’s murder and the needful racial revolution, educators should be wondering what steps to take to show they welcome and celebrate all differences in their classroom.

Goldenberg (2014) suggests that educators participate in the self-reflection of their own positionality in the classroom that creates supportive environments and appreciates everyone’s differences. Educators must understand how their identities have positioned them in relation to others in historical, political, and social contexts (Takacs, 2002). Further, educators should not attempt to deny their own culture and race as they teach their students. Instead, they should reflect on how their culture and race influence who they are to their students and colleagues. (Goldenberg, 2014). It is through this reflective and attentive lens that we can identify shifts in our own thinking.

This reflective approach is supported through educational standards. CCSSO’s Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) developed standards for high-quality teaching that educators are expected to follow (2013). The CCSSO stated that teachers should develop a deeper understanding of one’s own frame of reference to recognize how potential biases can impact expectations and relationships with students and their families. Standard Two defines the need for teach-

ers to understand and embrace individual differences and diverse cultures. Standard Nine stresses that teachers be reflective, continually evaluate their choices and actions, and seek out ways to grow professionally. While reflective thinking can promote forward thinking and promote change, positionality statements allow a deeper understanding of point of view.

Statements of positionality are simply a description of the identifiers that have shaped who someone is and describe his or her position within relationships (Takacs, 2002). The statement can be derived from any identifier that is relevant to their position within the societal context and helps to frame whether the information is coming from someone who is in a position of power or a position of marginalization. The author selects which identifiers best suit them, but generally explains

factors like race, ethnicity, religion, language of origin, heritage, immigration status, gender, family status, geographic location, age, sexuality, occupation, and education. Together, reflection and positionality can shape a broader view by which to discuss equality, diversity, and social justice.

Given the scope of current events, we reflected on our own concepts of diversity and our personal histories that shaped our perspectives of diversity, equity, and social justice. We closed with positionality statements which broaden perspectives, clarify point of view, and unify us all through the larger context for understanding one another. It is our hope that these vignettes may serve as a prompt for one's own reflection and ignite conversation with others.

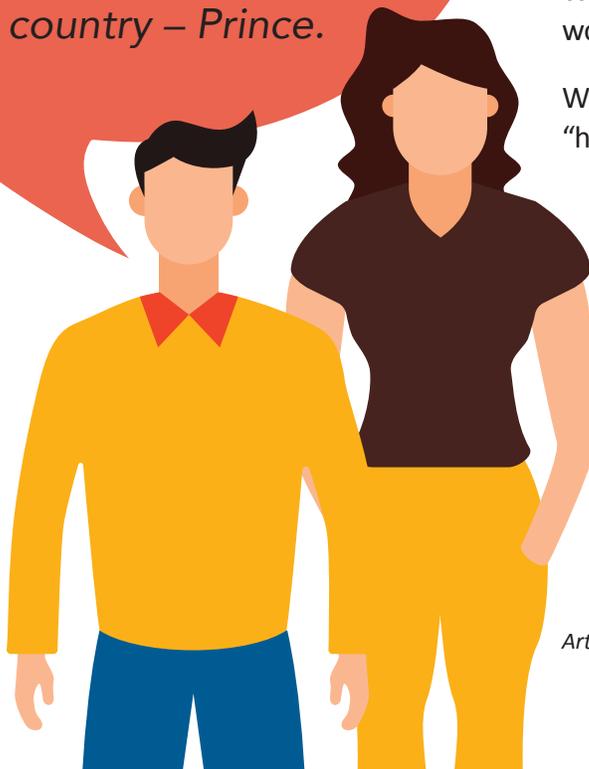
The Room Where It Happens

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As early as junior high school, I wanted to adopt. As a high school student, when I envisioned my future family, it consistently included children who did not grow in my body or look like me. Growing up in a conservative Southern family, I rarely dared to utter these plans. When I did, the listener assumed it was a phase I would grow out of. I did not.

While our multicultural family has not shirked from “hard” conversations, the onset of the pandemic seemed to increase the frequency and intensity of these conversations. Following the July 2020 release of the Hamilton musical by Disney+, our 10-year old daughter evolved into a dedicated fan. In our house, it’s all Hamilton, all the time. If the Hamilton soundtrack is not in the background, it’s because my daughter is not at home. One of her favorite songs is “The Room Where It Happens” where Aaron Burr, nemesis of Alexander Hamilton, bemoans be-

As white parents with a Chinese-American child, our family is constantly aware of the implicit and explicit racism occurring in our country – Prince.



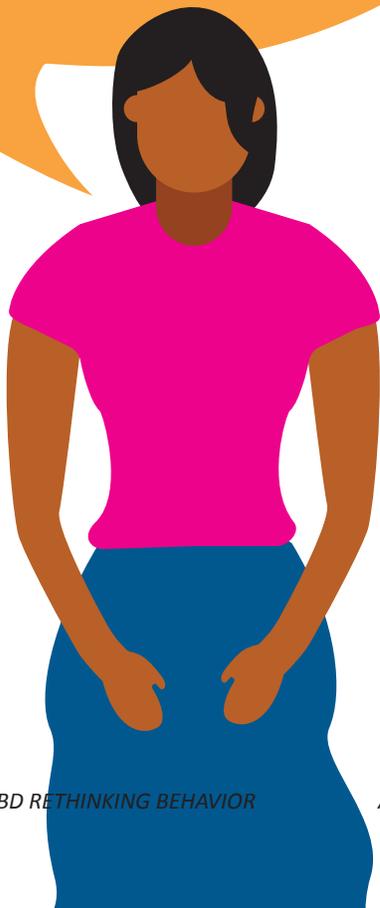
ing left out of decisions of national importance. The dinner meeting between Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison - which has historical evidence of actually having occurred - included a pact to support each other's political agendas. The significance of the song is that major decisions about the livelihoods of many people are frequently made behind closed doors.

The most beautiful aspect of the Hamilton musical, in my opinion, is the racial diversity of the cast. Because my daughter is now part of the dedicated

#HamFam, I've heard a podcast about the intent of the representation. Lin Manuel-Miranda, creator of the musical, and fellow cast members have noted that women and people of color were indeed present at the beginning of the United States. Yet, in whitewashing history, we have conveniently left out these groups. If you were not an active participant who was driving the change, or you were not in "The Room Where It Happens," your best interests and needs were not represented.

As white parents with a Chinese-American child, our family is constantly aware of the implicit and explicit racism occurring in our country. In the midst of a global pandemic and a racial revolution, we have uncomfortable, necessary conversations about what racism looks like. Our thoughtful daughter asks difficult questions that I often cannot answer. As a white, heterosexual, middle class, highly educated, *almost* middle-aged Southern woman living in the Midwest, I have a significant amount of privilege in most social and professional situations where I find myself. More often than not, I am present - or at least represented - in "The Room Where It Happens." My daughter? Not so much. Beyond my own family, I am compelled to ask, where does my responsibility lie for those who have no representation? Who will be in the Room for them?

*I want to celebrate who I am,
and I want to celebrate
those whose identities are
different from mine
– Bassingthwaite*



The Stories that We Celebrate

Brenda Bassingthwaite, PhD, BCBA, Associate Professor in Psychology, University of Nebraska Medical Center

I grew up in Watertown, South Dakota, a community with a population just over 20,000 people. We were known as the Watertown Arrows for sports and other team events. It is predominantly a white community with current statistics showing that 93% of its citizens are White (non-Hispanic; United States Census Bureau, 2021). In the 1920's, a legend was written by Gen. M.W. Sheafe about

young love between the daughter of a Sioux Chief and a young Pawnee brave that was so strong it united the two tribes. This legend became known as the KiYi Legend and every year during homecoming festivities, a court of maidens and braves were named with a designated King and Queen. The homecoming court dressed in outfits representative of braves and maidens. I believe it was in 2015 that the educational leaders put an end to this tradition out of respect for the Native American community, but every year there seems to be petitions that circle about reinstating the tradition.

While the legend was a positive fictional story (i.e., love, happy endings, peace between tribes), I'm interested that a white man chose to write about Native Americans and that a predominantly white community chose to accept it as their own story to bring the community together. There are certainly conflicts among the white communities that could have served as inspiration. My grandmother who grew up in Kulm, ND, a Swedish community, enjoyed telling the story of her declining an invitation to dance with a young Lawrence Welk at a community event because he was Norwegian. She was taught that Norwegians and Swedish should not engage with each other. While there wasn't warring going on between the communities, there certainly would have been some divisiveness to address.

I was pleased to see the homecoming tradition change. Our community was celebrating a fictional story that wasn't about us (a predominantly white community) and in so doing, was disrespectful to the community of focus (Native Americans). This isn't about political correctness but it is social justice and equality. Our times are changing and hopefully our understanding of inclusive communities is growing.

As I reflect on the stories that we celebrate, I hope we can celebrate all stories within a community. I am a 48-year-old, white, heterosexual, Luther-

*The removal of statues and changing names of important buildings is about changing our schemas rather than removing history
– Manning.*

an female who grew up as the youngest child with two brothers in the rural Midwest to middle-class parents who continue to be married today. I'm a third-generation college graduate who earned a Doctorate in Psychology. These variables, and others, provide a reference for my lived experiences and perspectives when engaging in conversations. I want to celebrate who I am, and I want to celebrate those whose identities are different from mine. I want to make space for others to lead their celebration on their own terms. It is common to have biases as people share their identities, and hopefully, recognizing those biases leads to further personal reflection and growth. How can we create spaces to tell and listen to real stories so that we can make amazing things happen together?

The Things That Define Us

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I am the youngest of six in a blended family. While I grew up among tumbleweeds and mesquite trees in Southwest Texas, I spent countless summers in Pennsylvania coal country. The larger dichotomy and complex contradictions between my Texan identity and northern family roots were always there, but none more so than over this past summer.



The killing of George Floyd prompted a series of events across the country, including the removal of monuments, statutes, and namesakes who were proponents of slavery and other controversial historical figures. As a result, the middle school I attended went through the arduous process of

changing its name. A series of petitions were posted

online calling the district to move

away from recognizing

the damage

caused by Robert E.

Lee and toward

a name that repre-

sented a safe space where

all students could feel

confident in their cultural

heritage. Though a

name change had been

brought up over the

years, the current conflict

created a micro civil war of its own

across the city. At first, I was frustrated,

just like many of the students and community mem-

bers. Though I have been long gone

from my hometown, my heart for the people and the community still remains.

I wonder how we accelerate diversity, equity, and social justice for our future generations – Hermes.

I worried that the school would lose its rich history and sense of identity. Those critical years in middle school have become a part of me. I personified our rebel mascot and our school colors ran deep. Even today, I have an affinity for civil war history and lean toward shades of blue and grey. Without even realizing it, I found myself relating to the traditional culture of the south.

After some introspection this summer, I pondered on my perspective of cultural diversity. My anxiety about losing the picturesque heritage of a middle school name indicated that I was still connected to a history that did not represent me. Had growing up in a school with the seal of the confederate approval impact my perspective? Was it possible that exposure to confederate statues shifted my views? I teach diversity and address bias in my college classes to pre-service teachers, but it wasn't until I explored implicit bias that I truly understood what it meant to our country to remove these barriers. Rynders (2019) defines implicit bias as the unconscious cognitive schema that organizes day-to-day functioning. The removal of statues and changing names of important buildings is about changing our schemas rather than removing history. I hope that going forward we can appreciate our own heritage, but more importantly, embrace our future. These ideas cannot flourish and grow without looking beyond our own lens.

I identify as a middle-aged, white, female, first generation college student with a PhD in special education who grew up in the south with family heritage from the north who now resides between the two. Meanwhile, my husband is a veteran whose heritage is rooted in Mohawk tradition and military service. While two of my three children are grown and have their own identities with their own positionalities that include descriptors like transgender, disability, and single, I still wonder how the youngest one who will be entering a middle school will describe himself. How can we foster a sense of cultural identity as we explore diversity, equity, and social justice with our pre-service teachers and our younger generation?

The Generational Gaps and Growth

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My favorite cousin and I often reminisce on our shared family memories about our grandparents' Kentucky farm mostly to laugh and to find guiding wisdom, but also to get a better understanding of our parents and countless cousins in a different light. We find ourselves pondering the changes from farm life to urban mobility. Our work ethic and skill set from our younger years on the farm with our grandparents helped further our careers. He retired as an Air Force Colonel and I continue to work as a health care educator. The years have taken us away from our family's farm roots to other countries and cultures. However, looking back, I am grateful that our life experiences pushed the expansion of our cultural competency and allowed us to embrace diversity with our careers and community activities.

It was over two decades ago that my own sons began to develop curiosities about life beyond our small town. I wanted to nurture the perspective-taking and open mindedness I experienced. My cousin and I took the young teens on an exploratory trip through Washington, D.C where we viewed the vast diversity, history, and knowledge of our country. They were glued to his every word, and I found myself reliving the pages of my old history books. As we walked around the markers of time, we glossed over how racism, ethnicity, and religion had the potential to drive wedges between our families and communities. As we connected across generations, there were still pieces left out. Life goes on and, as many of us do, we just left that story untold. However, the events over the past year have me reliving the experiences with a new lens.

Prior to this year, I had a simplistic view of diversity as only the collection of places and people we encounter. Wells et. al (2016) propose an intentional cultural effectiveness model where

self-awareness, knowledge and skills are dynamic and intentional. Through reflection and candid conversations, I became astutely aware of how diversity is a key part of heritage and distinctly derived through courageous self-awareness and inquiry. My cousin recently told me about the family's "great divide" with our grandparents. My grandmother's family were Yankee sympathizers who boarded horses and provided meals to traveling soldiers. However, my grandfather's family owned slaves who then stole those horses to support the Confederate's efforts. These divisions in loyalties and beliefs ran deep creating an undercurrent of prejudice and racism. While our parents slowly made behavioral changes by squelching the outward name calling, they were ill equipped to examine the implicit biases across the generations found in white privilege, racial discrimination, and equal rights.

In these turbulent times, people find themselves on different sides of the political rift. In light of the constant inflammatory rhetoric during these years, our last two generations are beginning to unify in progressive change. My own sons took my unexpressed desire to be an advocate and voice for others and led me into their sense of "we," building a strong sense of social justice and embracing diversity. They have taught me that we don't have time for a generation to only "nudge change." Evolution and change previously unfolded across generations, but now has to occur in a lightyear.

I wonder how we accelerate diversity, equity, and social justice for our future generations. I am a white, middle-aged divorced female, 5th generation southerner, cradle Catholic, culturally attentive, single mother of two energetic sons who is relaunching a third career as an assistant professor teaching school-based practices in occupational therapy. How do we foster a growth mindset that disrupts the generational cycle to allow for timely reconciliation and healing?

What are the Next Steps?

As educators, we are responsible to pursue diversity, equity, and social justice in ways that ensure everyone has a voice. Milner (2017) stressed that personal reflection and an understanding of one's own positionality can teach students how to disrupt stereotypes. Reflecting on prior experiences and their impact on current events is a start. It helps us to determine what is working and where more work needs to be done. One of the first tasks President Biden addressed when he took office on January 20, 2021 was to sign two executive orders that addressed discrimination and racial equity (Sullivan, et al, 2021; Olson, 2021). Nominees to his cabinet are of more diverse backgrounds than any previous administration. If these nominees are confirmed by the Senate, we can expect a kaleidoscope of voices that have the potential to reshape our nation's policies. However, we need to continue to work on an individual level, shaping our own dialogue, identifying our own biases, and promoting our own changes. We encourage you to develop your own reflective statement and positionality that helps to model forward-thinking change for your students. Most important, take action now for a better future for everyone. Let your voice be heard. Start simple by discussing diversity with your colleagues and your students. Tell your story to *Rethinking Behavior*.

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