The Message or the Messenger:

Reflection on the Volatility of Evoking Novice Teachers' Courageous Conversations on Race

Introduction

I have said this to all of you in other classes, I believe that the reason why there was so much opposition to Dr.----'s discussion of the relationship between race and achievement gap in this class is not because of the message, but because of the messenger. (student comment)

Every teacher is a messenger. The message that a teacher communicates and portrays is acquired formally and informally through systematic study, and environmental and socialization processes. While formal study happens consciously within a particular period of time, experiential learning that impinges on the development of the message happens all the time. It is a pervasive force with a long incubation period. No matter how the effects of environmental processes are suppressed and ignored, eventually they must crystallize and serendipitously or overtly impact one's practice of giving the message.

In my professional experience as a classroom teacher and as a teacher educator, I have defined myself variously as a teacher/scholar, a reflective practitioner, and recently as a border-crosser, but I had not perceived myself as a messenger. The quote above inspired reflection not only on the "message" that prompted it, but also on the origins and metamorphosis of my messages in teacher education.

I acquired the initial license and stamp of approval to tell my message when I received a Bachelor of Arts degree in history in my country of birth, Nigeria, West Africa. This accomplishment positioned me as a federal education officer with the privilege of assisting younger minds to grasp the chronological details and intricacies of European history, British history, African history, and Nigerian history and government. At this point in my message-delivering development, there was little attempt to doctor the message in any way. The message that I acquired in my learning was routinely delivered as received.

In fact, the onus was on a messenger of my caliber, a federal education officer, to keep the message that I communicated to advanced level, university-bound students—the crème de la crème—of Nigerian secondary education students close to the messages that I had received about these subjects from my university professors and textbooks. The best messengers communicated the authoritative message without diversion. I graduated in the second-class upper division category, a strong endorsement of the high quality of my message acquisition and a guarantee that I should be a career-long expert-transmitter of the message.

I did not disappoint or waiver from the trust that was committed to me. I proclaimed the message vigorously for eight years to several classes of students and took pride in my charges gaining admission to tertiary institutions in the country. Having presented the same message to different groups of students over and over for this period of time, I came to the point of wanting to receive more myself. Although the message was new and fresh in the ears and minds of the hearers and receivers, it was no longer sustaining my own intellect. Therefore, I set my sights on "going abroad" to study, to rejuvenate myself as a messenger by exponentially expanding the knowledge that informed my message.

The desire to elevate my place as a messenger of teaching and learning and thereby increase my message-giving capacity became a reality when I crossed physical and literal borders to find myself seated in a university classroom about

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10,000 miles from my country, a minority 'other' among members of the dominant group in the country of my border-crossing, a giver of a message turned receiver (Amobi, 2004). The process of acquiring the message and reaching the goal of attaining a doctorate degree in secondary education was fraught with superficial, man-made roadblocks that border-crossers usually confront: marginalization, initial lack of acceptance, covert second-guessing of the border-crosser's capability to participate in intellectual discourse of the message, and outspoken pronouncement aimed at forcing the border-crosser to lower her eyes from the prize.

While fellow students who were Black-identified citizens of the borderland chafed at these characterizations of racialized condescension, I marshaled all my efforts toward getting the endorsement of a superior message carrier. I had not come from one end of the world to another to imperil my goal by fussing about the inequities of power relations based on race and ethnic differences. I came to the borderland to pursue a doctorate degree in secondary education with emphasis in curriculum development, social studies education, and educational foundations. That mission was my only concern. Whispers and murmurings about veiled or blatant acts of racial discrimination should not deter me from my focus. Let others take care of that: for this border-crosser, the goal was academic knowledge and accomplishment for greater message-delivering capacity.

As an immigrant from a society where I was a member of the dominant group, my single-minded means of penetrating the "culture of power" in a borderland institution of higher learning was to bring forth the cultural capital of a strong liberal arts education that I had acquired in my country of origin. Equipped with this cultural capital, I became competent and adept at meeting and exceeding the standards for attaining the prize of higher learning within four years of my inception into graduate study. I obtained a doctorate degree in secondary education with all the concomitant rights and privileges to proclaim the message of my field of study to a wider, far-flung audience.

I chose to resume my work as a more highly-qualified messenger in diaspora instead of returning to my own country. It was then that I began to see that the scepter of racial discrimination that I had noticed as a graduate student—which I had ignored for the purpose of getting to the promised land of professional attainment—was a continuing presence despite my recent accomplishment. Over the years, as I have proclaimed the message of the field of teaching and learning at several institutions in my country of diaspora, I have lived the reality of Dei's (2001) statement:

> For Blacks living at the disjuncture of White-dominated societies, one of the things we have to deal with is the contradiction of claiming and feeling we belong, while at the same time facing exclusionary practices which proclaim, in many different ways that we do not really belong. (p. 140)

In other words, achievement of the cultural capital did not automatically consign equal privileges in the power relations in institutionalized professional settings. Whether I accepted it or not, race matters. This realization notwithstanding, I was determined not to be a messenger of race, racism, and antiracism. The message that I had received during my illustrious graduate study program was the tome of the historical, philosophical, and social foundations of secondary school curriculum, the methods of instruction in secondary schools, and the methods of teaching social studies. I would stay out of the fray of the debate about race and relate the message I thought really mattered to my students.

The Contexts for Delivering the Message

Several authors have pointed out a glaring demographic factor that has characterized American education in recent years, mainly the fact that more than 85% of teachers are White, while the student population in public school has become increasingly made up of children of color (Cross, 2003; Gay & Howard, 2000; Johnson, 2002). Moreover, the ranks of teacher educators, those who prepare teachers to teach, is intensely White.

The demographic divide that Cross (2003) described as a cultural/racial mismatch or gap has been reenacted over and over in the various teacher education contexts where I have had the opportunity to deliver my message to undergraduate and graduate teacher education students. Be it in the southeastern or the southwestern region of the United States, the demographic mismatch is a persistent presence in the composition of the students that enroll in my teacher education classes: over 90% White with a smidgen of Black and Hispanic/Latino students, and in some instances zero number of students of color. Also, among my fellow faculty messengers, my racial, cultural, and ethnic type is always a rarity.

The question then is this: How did the drastic change in teaching context affect the delivery of my message? Initially, not much changed in my message-delivery apparatus. As mentioned earlier, I was set on pouring my acquired knowledge of curriculum and instruction into my students. That was my perception of my commission as a messenger. Really, in the early years of my professional tenure in teacher education, because of my racial and cultural identification as the "other," there was a concerted effort made by my faculty superiors and peers to put on me the superficial mantle of the "multicultural expert." I made it known in those instances that my professional expertise was in educational foundations and curriculum and instruction. I strived to stay true and steadfast to my learned message.

However, the content of my professed message included discourse about issues of multicultural education and cultural diversity. The teaching of educational foundations must invariably touch on these matters and that was exactly what I did: I gave the necessary cursory attention to multicultural perspectives on education and the issues of diversity and moved on. I did not dwell on them. My approach of teaching about cultural diversity in education in those early years featured three descriptive characteristics: conciliation, advocacy, and hope.

In preparing preservice teachers to work effectively with culturally diverse public school children, I used "safe" dialogues to ease their understanding of the historical ideologies of the concept of cultural diversity, to prod novice teachers to open up about their biases and prejudices, and to promote attitudes of tolerance through discussion of the attributes of an effective teacher of culturally diverse students. Conciliation in this teaching context consisted of not making my overwhelmingly White students feel persecuted or made to answer for racial inequities (St. Denis & Schick, 2003).

Advocacy translated into the message that we can all learn to get along—White, Black, Latino, Asian, and others. Along with advocacy was the expectation that in some amazing way, my students would become transformed by the message of conciliation and hope and rise above their socializing influences to treat all their pupils equitably.

In retrospect, I now see that my conciliatory message aimed at changing individual students' attitudes and converting them to anti-prejudice ways of being is cosmetic at best. Conciliation and advocacy are superficial reinforcement when preparing educators to work with diverse populations of students in the face of ingrained institutionalized practices of identification through the category of race (Duesterberg, 1999). My predominating evasive approach of lulling students' sensibilities with multicultural education platitudes must give way to engaging them in critical conversations on race, racism, and how their racial views might influence their teaching of children from diverse backgrounds.

Shift to Conversations on Race

Two events that happened at different periods in my professional journey in teacher education precipitated the shift to engaging novice teachers in conversations on race. The influence of the first event has been far-reaching in my thinking, teaching, and scholarship in teacher education. When I became intellectually engrossed with the writings of John Dewey, Donald Schön, and others on reflective practice, the reverberating effect changed my message-delivery system. I went from being preoccupied with delivering the message to questioning it. I began to problematize and reframe the message before delivering it, while delivering it, and after delivering it. Every professional message that I have previously held and the new messages that I continue to construct through continuous reflection on experience become subject to scrutiny.

Reflective practice is not something that one keeps to oneself. A reflective practitioner thrives on proselytizing others into the practice of reflection. As I became reflective of my message and the strategies for relating it, I began to engage students in critical reflection of the message they were getting through oral and written dialogues. In this frame of mind, every subject matter that spans my teaching becomes problematic. The mindset of critical reflection has trumped pedantic message delivery in my practice. The process of becoming a reflective practitioner has occurred over a period of time and has evolved into a life-long professional mission and orientation.

The second event was more recent. The year 2004 marked the commemoration of a major watershed in the history of education in the United States: the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court decision in the *Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka* case that dismantled legal school segregation. From coast to coast, educational leaders and pundits held seminars, town meetings, and scholarly conventions to reflect on and analyze the educational aftermath of the ruling. The common theme that emerged from all levels and kinds of discourse on the educational consequences of desegregation by legislation was the persistence of achievement gaps in the academic performance of White, Black, and Hispanic students in the American public schools 50 years after this famous precedent-making decision.

As I pondered on the writings on the phenomenon, I found that there were two contending reasons associated with the inequitable academic performance of students from diverse backgrounds: race and social class (Aronson, 2004; Barton, 2004; Evans 2005; Farkas, 2003; Gay & Howard, 2000; Mathis, 2005; Mickelson, 2003). In spite of the inconclusiveness of the evidence regarding the association of racial discrimination with the difference in achievement, I found reports that stated that—"the average 8th grade minority student performs at about the level of the average 4th grade White student" (Barton, p. 9) and "the fact the performance of poor 11th-grade Latinos and African American is lower than or barely equal to that of 8th-grade middle-class European Americans in … reading, writing math, and science" (Gay & Howard, p. 6)—quite disconcerting.

More disturbing is the fact that the achievement gap persists among middle-class African American and Latino students in suburban communities, "even among many who do not live in poverty, whose parents are professionals, and who

attend schools that are well staffed and have ample resources" (Evans, p. 583). The national stocktaking on the distressing disparity in achievement among diverse racial groups of students provoked in me a self-critique of the "safe" conversations on multicultural education in my teacher education courses: conversations that were devoid of conflict, controversy, passion, and contention. The trajectory between race and achievement fuelled in me the need to infuse honest dialogue and critical thinking about the issues of race, racism, antiracism, and White identity and privilege into the discourse on multicultural education in one of my teacher education courses.

Implementing "Courageous Conversations" on Race

The concept of courageous conversations came from the content of a set of videotapes entitled *Closing the Achievement Gap* (The Video Journal of Education, 2002). The context for engaging novice teachers in courageous conversations on race occurred in Critical Issues in Secondary Education, an educational foundations course for second-semester pre-student teaching secondary education students in a southwestern urban university in the United States.

The class consisted of 28 students, out of which 21 were female and seven male. The racial and ethnic composition of the class mirrored the population of teacher education students described previously: 24 students of Caucasian background and four students of color, in this case, Hispanics.

Course Structure

Critical Issues in Secondary Education was designed to help students examine perspectives of critical issues in contemporary education, to think critically about these issues, and to develop their own viewpoints. The course delivery methods consisted of interactive lecture and whole and small group discussions.

The course content included ideas from Evans's (2002) *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Secondary Education*, a required textbook that chronicles the pro and con viewpoints on several educational issues—for example, religion in schools, school uniforms, zero tolerance policies in schools, high-stakes standardized testing, technology in schools, performance-based compensation for teacher, and multicultural education. I supplemented students' understanding of the issues with background history and extensive expert knowledge from current professional journal articles. Students responded to course content through discussions, team and individual presentations, and written reflections.

I helped to design the content of Critical Issues in Secondary Education (SED 321). I have taught the course since its inception in the program of study for novice teachers in January 2003. The advent of a course that was designed to examine critical issues in education provided a natural outlet for the shift in my thinking and teaching to reflective practice.

Unlike the previous inclination of feeding students with factual, unexamined knowledge that characterized the pre-critical reflective days of my teaching, I focused course delivery on engaging students in critical self-reflection on their viewpoints on the various controversial issues that spanned the course. My approach of providing a discursive space for students to interrogate each other on their worldviews on educational issues within the framework of expert knowledge from readings, field experience observations, and personal experience of schooling clicked with students' need for self-expression (Solomon, 2000). The discussions from this class routinely spilled over into other class meetings in the department that were scheduled after SED 321, as reported by my colleagues.

My role as a messenger in the class was not just to tell but to inquire about, to question, and to challenge students' beliefs and perspectives on educational issues. The successive students enrolled in the course and I thrived on this perpetual questioning approach of course discourse on critical issues in education until I chose to focus some attention on the educational implications of issues of race, racism, and White privilege. The discussion on race began in the 4th week of a 15-week semester schedule of classes.

The Lull before the Storm

The class had completed a discussion on the issue of performance-based pay for teachers. Class discourse was structured by the Yes and No viewpoints of this question: Should teacher pay be tied to measures of student learning? Next, I presented background knowledge to the students on the ideologies of multicultural education in the United States in anticipation of class discourse on two conflicting perspectives on multicultural education, exemplified by Asante's (2002) "The Afrocentric Idea in Education" and Ravitch's (2002) "A Culture in Common." While a majority of the students readily agreed with Ravitch's conciliatory stance on the "salad bowl" or mosaic motif of cultural diversity, Asante's blunt criticism of the "hegemonic Eurocentric" hold on education and his call for an Afrocentric perspective on education engendered a lively debate on the need for multicultural education.

Comments such as "I am a mathematics teacher, I don't need to teach about culture"; "If these people want to live in America, they should learn the American culture"; "How many cultures should I teach?" and so on were bandied around in the classroom. In prior semesters, at this juncture, I would step in, provide some conciliatory platitudes on the need for teachers to have high expectations for all their students and move on to some other less personally controversial issue. This time, I did not.

After the usual two-class meeting discourse on multicultural education, I followed up with discussion of the contents of a three-part video series entitled "Closing the Achievement Gap" (The Video Journal of Education, 2002). In the video series, the narrator examined the impact of race on the achievement gap. He called on educators to engage in courageous conversations about race as a means of understanding the importance of race in everyday experience in the United States. Furthermore, he narrated that individuals Black, White or Brown should be aware of their own racial predicament and the racial lens through which they look at students. Moreover, he made the following assertion, "To be anti-racist is active. To be non-racist is to passively allow racism to continue. To close the achievement gap, we must be aggressively anti-racist."

The pointed references to race, Whiteness, racism, and anti-racism in the videos did not seem to be agreeable to the students in the class. Several students, when confronted with information about the impact of race on the achievement gap argued that social class, rather than race, was responsible for the disparity in student achievement.

In a major shift from the previous practice of presenting multicultural education in the form of helping my predominantly Caucasian students appreciate other "cultures" while consciously and unconsciously using Whiteness as an invisible norm for examining otherness, I racialized Whiteness (Cross, 2003; Dei, 2001; St. Denis & Schick, 2003). By so doing, I made visible what had to this point been invisible in my course discourse on multiculturalism (Johnson, 2002). The experience was reminiscent of unveiling for all to see the proverbial invisible elephant

in the room. The questions that I posited for discussion included the following:

- ◆ What does it mean to be White?
- ◆ How do White teachers develop racial awareness?
- ◆ What are the advantages and privileges of being White?
- ◆ How do White teachers see "other" students?

These questions and others generated responses characterized by St. Denis and Schick (2003) as "unexamined commonsense notions to which students have access and can take for granted in the repertoire of social commentary" (p. 61). Students' resistive representations that depicted the characteristic above included comments such as:

- ◆ "Race doesn't matter in education today."
- ◆ "I do not see color, I only see people."
- ◆ "Things have changed, we should stop bringing up the past."
- ◆ "America is a land of opportunity, if people work hard, they will succeed."
- ◆ "By talking about race, we are promoting racism."

And so on.

As I pressed on to ask further questions about these assumptions, I noticed that the level of resistance to the "talk" about racism and racism was building up. Finally, in Week 5, during the fourth class discourse on multicultural education, a twenty-something Caucasian male student suddenly interrupted class dialogue. He slapped his hand on the desk and pronounced in a loud voice, "I am tired of hearing about race."

I did not realize that the situation had come to this. Other students murmured or spoke their assent to their peer's outburst. I announced to the class that although I had scheduled one more class discourse on multicultural education, I would prematurely conclude the discussion that day and continue with the next critical issue on the course syllabus. The incident was a blow to my position as a messenger. This was the first time that my message had generated such hostility.

Following the Storm

As the course progressed in the next several weeks following the fateful incident, the cloud from the stormy outburst remained in the air and shrouded class discourse on other issues that were directly or indirectly related to race and racism. I taught the class as a messenger whose role and capability for effective message delivery had been compromised or flawed.

To get some third-person critique, I spoke with several of my faculty colleagues about the incident. Their reassuring comments that I had done the right thing by cracking students' insulation against anti-racism did not provide any assurance. Unconsciously, I developed a me-and-them perspective in my relationship with the audience of my message. Although some of the students, including the four Hispanics and a precious few Caucasian students, expressed that they had experienced a shift in their thinking about the impact of race and racism on education as a result of the class discourse, I was too preoccupied with the loss of communication with a large group of my Caucasian students that seemed not to have benefited from this segment of the course.

The regretful cogitation about the experience continued until the last class meeting for the course. As is my usual practice, I engaged course participants in a formal (written) and an informal (oral) reflection on the contents of the course and the effectiveness of course delivery. During the debriefing on the course segment on multicultural education, one student (Caucasian) remarked that she did not appreciate the abrupt ending to the discussion on race and racism. She went on to say that the fact "a few students" were not comfortable with the discussion of the issue was not a good reason for a shutdown of the conversation on race.

Several students took up the same issue and remonstrated on the premature ending of an "enlightening discussion we were having." In a state of disbelief and amazement at this turn of events, I asked the class, "Why didn't anybody speak up in support of the discussion on race and achievement at the time? In response to that question, a Caucasian female student made the comment that inspired my reflection on the scenario:

> I have said this to all of you in other classes, I believe that the reason why there was so much opposition to Dr. Amobi's discussion of the relationship between race and achievement gap in this class is not because of the message, but because of the messenger.

The student's peers demurred that the racial category of the messenger had any bearing on the truncating of the message of race and achievement. However, her assertion fueled my thinking about strategies and practices for making racial discourse devoid of angry outbursts from students. More important, students' belated affirmation of the instructiveness of the discourse on race generated further reflection on my own message-delivery capability in the eye of the storm: Should I just fold as I did in this scenario in order to deescalate dissent? Should I—like a seasoned airplane pilot—continue to gain altitude to ride above the storm? What message-delivery practices are useful for continuing to fly high in a stormy condition such as the one described in the scenario above?

Lessons Learned from the Volatility of Conversations on Race

Students' resistance to my interrogation of their worldviews about racial identities is not a unique occurrence. Several scholars have reported similar reaction to teaching about race (Dei, 2001; Gay & Howard, 2000; Helms et al. 2003; Johnson, 2002; St. Denis & Schick, 2003; Solomon, 2000). St. Denis and Schick explained that "resistance to … anti-racist education manifests itself in many forms including various combinations of denial of inequality, selective perceptions of reality, guilt and anger, and at times withdrawal from learning" (p. 57).

The desk-slamming outburst in my classroom personified anger. I interpreted the lone outburst and the murmured complaints from the rest of the class as a conspiracy to withdraw from learning and as my wake-up call to pull the plug on the rest of my message on anti-racist pedagogy. Now I see that resistance to a message does not denote that the message should not be told. Rather, it is an opportunity to retool the message for better telling.

In retrospect, I found that these two retrofitting strategies could have made a difference on students' receptivity to the conversation on race: (a) providing background knowledge on the ideologies of race, racism, and anti-racism; and (b) being aware of my position as an authority person in the classroom.

I now see that the knowledge materials that I furnished students to prepare them to engage in the conversation on race—namely, video presentations and journal articles—focused on problems and perceived consequences of race, racism, and anti-racism in American education. Orienting students to the problems of racism and interrogating them—especially my Caucasian students—about their racial identity served to alienate, rather than pull them into the conversation.

A one-sided conversation of this nature will only serve to pit one group

against another and reinforce the sense of being persecuted for the "oppressed" group's plight. Balancing the equation would require provision of some background knowledge about the conceptions of race and racism through history. A preconversation on the conceptions of race, for example attitudinal, biological, and social categories, and institutionalized practices of power relations throughout history might produce the effect of helping students better articulate the problems of race and racism in terms of the general human experience of inequality, the haves and have-nots, rather than as an assault on their personal racial identity (Duesterberg, 1999; St. Denis & Schick, 2003).

As mentioned earlier, in my teaching I use a discursive approach to elicit students' worldviews about critical issues in education. Students are encouraged to participate in class discussion structured by pre-planned questions on the content of course readings. Invariably, the questions prepared for class discourse generate other questions from the professor or students.

In this discursive environment, it is possible to take one's sight away, for a fleeting moment, from the power relations in the classroom. In the discursive space that I provide for the students, I work to downplay my authority position in order to give the students freedom of self-expression. On other issues, this approach has consistently produced the desired result. Not so in the conversation on race: my authority position and personhood as a "messenger of color" assumed prominence over the message. Therefore, as Duesterberg (1999) enjoined:

> I have to appreciate that my position as a teacher is one that carries authority and power over my students. My desire to enlighten my students to an antiracist pedagogy or my desire that they take up some subject positions over others may not have the emancipatory consequences I intend. (p. 756)

There are two interrelated attitudes and ways of thinking for incorporating Duesterberg's suggestion into my message-delivery repertoire for talking about controversial issues, specifically race. First, a truly discursive space should be accommodating to resistance, expressed covertly or covertly. Bringing the conversation on race to an abrupt end because of a student's resistance and outburst made me unconsciously complicit in creating an atmosphere that was not tolerant of dispute. Resistance to the flow of a conversation in a truly discursive space should itself become a subject of critique rather than a preemptive end to discourse.

Secondly, every "truth" in a message tabled in a discursive space is subject to contention. It is common knowledge in the field of teacher education that the predispositions, beliefs, and values that preservice teachers bring to teaching "are a much more powerful socializing influence than… preservice education" (Johnson, 2002, p. 154). Helping students to attain a shift in their thinking about race and racism in education is a process, not a product.

An outburst that appeared as open hostility to the conversation may, in fact, be a stage in the process of experiencing that shift. Therefore, the action should be further examined as one chain in an interlinked chain of awareness continuum, not as a broken-off piece.

Then the question arises, what if it was a broken-off piece? What about students who would not embrace an antiracist view of education in spite of my best effort at facilitating courageous conversations on race? In a discursive space, a message is presented and discoursed to facilitate heightened awareness of a problem situation, not necessarily to convert the receivers to one's way of thinking.

Finally, implementing these lessons in successive opportunities to engage students in courageous conversations on race may not eliminate the occurrence of combustible resistance to the message. Now, whenever this reactive performance occurs, it will be acknowledged as such: a race-talk performance that may or not be subject to change.

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