

Literature Review: *Shades of White*

Megan Mallon

EDCI 755 Multicultural Issues in Teaching

Dr. Be Stoney

Kansas State University

October 2011

In *Shades of White* (2002), Pamela Perry explores the lives of white students at two different high schools; Valley Groves, where white students are in the majority and Clavey, where white students are in the minority. She looks at the racial understanding of these students and their relationships with students of other cultures (African American, Asian American, and Filipino). Perry makes the point that racial identity is “a social process, created and recreated by people in their daily lives and social interactions” (p. 5). This is a very important point and one I would do well to remember in my classroom. Perry uses her book to discuss the social organization of the high schools, the awareness of white students and their own culture, and the importance of having dialogue and discussions with students to foster a multicultural environment.

In both high schools, economic status and race participated in the make-up of the social organization of the students. At Valley Groves, in particular, race did not play into the social groups of students as a primary factor (p. 31). Instead, students first grouped themselves by socio-economic status (SES), and then by race. At Clavey, it was the opposite. Students first associated by race, and then by SES. This shows the difference between a school with a small amount of racial diversity (Valley Groves) and a school with a wide range of racial diversity (Clavey). My school is more similar to Clavey in the make-up of students. We have 67% low SES, and we have a racially diverse group of students. Due to the proximity to a military base, we have students from many cultural backgrounds. Students do not segregate into cliques as much in my elementary school as they might in a high school setting, but students seem more likely to group themselves by race rather than SES. There is also the concern, as we discussed in class and as Perry (2002) mentions, that middle-class students are seen, by themselves and others, as being without distinction (p. 28). Educators must take care not to let this happen.

In *Shades of White* (2002), Perry touches on the importance of students having an awareness of their own racial identity, as well as recognizing the differing racial identities of others. One way Clavey celebrated the racial diversity in their school was by having a variety of activities, including a “Multicultural Week” (p. 68). This made me think: how can schools that are made up of a majority of white students follow this example? Even at my school, with a fairly diverse population, we do not spend a lot of time celebrating cultures; this is an area for improvement.

Perry (2002) also gives multiple examples of white students that feel uncomfortable showing their true racial identity. These students attempt to change how they act to “fit in” with surroundings. In one example, a student chose to listen to certain types of music because it was “cool” (p. 112). In another instance, students from Clavey performed a play in different settings for the public. In most settings, where the audience was mainly African American, the students used Black English and street slang. However, when they performed in a setting where the audience was mainly white, they cut out the street slang and avoided using Black English (p. 131). These are examples of what can and will happen if I do not make my classroom an environment where everyone is free to be themselves. Students may also be likely to make

assumptions about other students. Problems are likely to arise when students have misconceptions about the cultural difference of their peers.

Perry (2002) gives the example of some students lumping all white families together and assuming that they are all “rich, powerful or successful” (p. 171). When white students, particularly those students who come from poor families, heard this assumption, they were upset. The way to avoid such assumptions is to have dialogue with students and discuss differences between students. Perry (2002) makes the distinction that students at Valley Groves did not have these discussions, where as students at Clavey were forced into dialogue about race because of their diverse population (pp. 75-80). The chapter Perry includes on the Million Man March illustrates this need for information. Through all of the classes, both at Valley Groves and at Clavey, many students were uninformed of the facts surrounding the event, and this was evident in their class discussions (pp. 136-146). I need to be forcing these types of dialogue in my classroom, because they are not always happening between my young students. If I do not encourage my students to discuss the differences between races and cultures, then who will? One way I can start these conversations is by bringing in family members of all the students (black, white, Asian, etc.) to share their family history and stories. In this way, I would not be putting significance on just one race. While we do discuss different races and how they relate to American and World History, it would be more meaningful and significant for students to hear stories and facts from classmates’ family members.

While Perry’s research in the book *Shades of White* (2002) primarily focuses on white students and their understanding of their racial identity, this book sheds important insight on how students of all races interact and identify with their peers. The research in this book is set at the high school level, but provides important insights that can support me in an elementary school setting. Recognizing how students may be organizing themselves socially will allow me to see how they relate to their peers, as well as how aware they are of their own racial identity and that of others. Forcing dialogue and discussions about important events and students’ understanding of other cultures will prepare my young students for important conversations they will be faced with in the future. I was impacted by Perry’s comment,

In the time I spent at Valley Groves, I never personally witnessed this kind of blatant racism (only the “color-blind,” power-evasive kind), but I was convinced by the African American students that it was alive and well at the school. (p. 154)

It seems logical to me that she did not see these small racist situations occurring (either from student to student, or teacher to student) because she is a white woman. I, too, am a white woman, and may not “be looking” for injustices occurring towards my students. My job is to train myself to always be aware; and taking this class and reading these books are an excellent way to begin.

Reference

Perry, P. (2002). *Shades of White*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.