(EAD850 Issues and Strategies in Multicultural Education)

A Critical Review of Julie Landsman's Arguments in

'A White Teacher Talks about Race'

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The discussion about race in a multicultural society is significant, and essentially should be addressed in the field of education because of its influence on society at large. Julie Landsman discusses in her book, *A White Teacher Talks about Race,* her personal experiences as a teacher working primarily with low income, racially diverse high school students. She is exposed to, and exposes race relations in her classroom and analyzes these conversations and interactions through her personal reflections. Having an understanding of student's individuality and the complexity of a pluralistic society, such as the population in the United States is essential for all people, but most specifically for educators. Furthermore, having an understanding of the fundamental concepts' of identity, culture and multiculturalism can be used to shape the perception one has of the "other." This paper will critically analyze Julie Landsman's conversation about race and education, and further encourages the reader to think about the ways education can be utilized in creating an equal society for all individuals.

Race and Identity

Landsman identifies the need to begin the conversation about race, and implements this conversation in her classroom, as well as in her narrative. She points out that "race and racism are complicated subjects (Landsman, p.xiv)" and acknowledges how this complexity has withheld society from confronting it, "we are so afraid we will say the wrong things (Landsman, p.xi)." Meanwhile, she also recognizes that "it is time to make mistakes and learn from them (Landsman, p.xii)." She identifies that mistakes will be made, but argues that making these mistakes are

better than continuing to remain silent on the topic. Her actions in working towards equality in a multicultural society are bold and certainly deserve recognition. Her courage to open this discussion is brave and progressive. However, while she has sparked the dialogue, her conversations could have gone a bit more in depth and wider is scope. For instance, she consistently uses the term "race," but failed to operationalize the term, which, could leave readers with various understandings of her text. When discussing "race," is she talking about a physical construct of a human's exterior that qualifies that person into a racial group, or is she talking about a social construction of these groups that places people into categories, such as Black, White, Latino and Asian. Without a clear understanding of her terminology, the reader has no choice but to create their own definition of race, which could be misleading, and ultimately refutes the validity of her argument.

The strength of Landsman's arguments could have been enhanced with a lengthier conversation about identity, race, and culture and their interrelatedness. The foundation of understanding identity in a multicultural society as "property and choice", "individual and unique (Obidah p.1039)", shines a light on how individualistic each person is. Rather than merely classifying people based on "race," looking at other variables in a person's life, such as socio-economic class, personal identity, sexual orientation, et cetera will show a more holistic approach to the social construct of society. Additionally, it is imperative to recognize the relation between identity and culture, and how relative these terms are to individual understanding. Hoffman D.M. argues for linkage between identity and culture when discussing

multicultural communication in *Culture and self in multicultural education: Reflections on discourse, text and practice* by saying the concepts "are simply not the same in all cultures or ethnic groups, and differences in concepts of self are among the most profound influences on cultural and social phenomena (Hoffman*,* p.556)." Therefore, a more in depth understanding of the complex societal constructs would have added legitimacy to Landsman's argument.

Culture and Motivation

Increasing equality in a multicultural society, via multicultural education depends significantly on the understanding of culture. Howard Gardner in his book *The Disciplined Mind* claimed the importance of how cultural perceptions apply to multicultural education, stating, "Cultures make choices (Gardner, p.101)." Landsman recognizes the importance of the role of culture in the outcome of multicultural education; she states that students with different cultural backgrounds are looking for their own position in schools, and schools play a large role in rewarding different cultures, including setting up role models, and the teaching of history, language, music, arts and science. On the other hand, she also recognizes cultural influence of students' surroundings, including family, peers, and their community as a whole. She says, "I believe we have to talk openly with those who are part of the students' environment, part of all that surrounds them, to find some answers to what is happening in our schools (Landsman, p.45)." Although she recognizes individual culture as a key factor in students' academic achievement, and understanding of

society, she forgets to look closer at students' intrinsic motivations.

Landsman overlooks student motivation, which is often argued by the school of cognitive revolution, stating that among the various factors determinate of one's educational outcome, such as personality, motivation and emotion, "probably the most crucial is motivation (Gardner, pg. 76)." Landsman, again, recognizes that students' surroundings could influence their cognition, but fails to look at students as individuals, with diverse personalities and most importantly, motivations. Motivation does, to some extent cognate externally, but, Landsman fails to analyze internal motivations within students. In front of the multifaceted prism of the effective ways of educating students in a multicultural society, Landsman loses the whole image from merely looking at all the surroundings, and leaving out the students' inner motivation.

Honesty, Willingness and Action to Embrace Equality

In a multicultural society, being honest to the misconception of "the melting pot (Howard, p.37)," accepting multiculturalism, willingly facing differences and creating a plan of action to transform societal ideals are essential to clinch equality. Opening the dialogue about race, identity, and culture with individuals, schools, communities, and policy makers is the beginning of being honest with each other and developing acceptance for our differences. After the "celebration of differences (Landsman, p.156)," it should lead people to become willing to open the door to equality for all people within the society.

Firmly supported by Landsman, Affirmative Action (Affirmative Action and

Diversity: http://aad.english.ucsb.edu/) is a helpful example, which offers an opportunity for minorities within society to positively contribute to society just as equally as the majority. Although Affirmative Action has caused great controversy among many in the United States, some stating reverse racism, it should be recognized as a step taken to open the door for the embracement of equality. While debates about Affirmative action continue, it demonstrates Landsman's clever point that a plan for action is something which must evolve with time, and cannot exist of "quick fixes (Landsman, p.35)". However, education's role in this transformation of society will be the key player, and, therefore must continue to vigorously maintain the dialogue among the field of multicultural education.

On the other hand, Landsman focuses more on the need for white teachers to have an understanding of this phenomena and "the power of white activism." Even though "whites" are the majority and have relative dominance in the society, this activism should come from all people; as Gary Howard claims "because the music of the United States is propelled by such a rich mixture of cultural rhythms, it is time for all of us to learn to move with grace and style to the new sounds (Howard, p.41)." If a change in the society is to happen, a shift of ideals is necessary. This transformation of ideals cannot solely come from white teachers; it must come from *all* teachers, administrators, policy makers, and *all* of society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Landsman has certainly taken a leap in the discussion of equality,

and has brought the attention to an issue that many societies, not just the United States are confronted with. As Landsman stated the need to begin the dialogue, we have. Now is the time to continue the dialogue, fine tune our rhetoric and understanding, and bring to light the much needed change. Multicultural education as a school of thought, mechanism for change and model for society can, and should be used to implement social equality.

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