

Coloring Her Way Through School: Esther, Alienated to the Borders

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ABSTRACT

Using a biopsychosocial lens, this single case study of Esther, exposes a broad contextual dimension of special needs children, those often thwarted by racism, colorism, and poverty and tainted by the low expectations of parents and teachers alike.

KEY WORDS: *colorism, border identity, poverty, race, special needs*

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to address the relationships of domination and difference, those relationships that continue to repress women and students of color and those with special needs--to confront and challenge compounded differences, historical repression, poverty, deprivation, devaluation and dispossession. And in so doing to sunder the bonds of interconnected domination in the service of engaging special needs students and women of color previously relegated to society's borders in the process of critical transformation necessary for and to personal as well as social reclamation and resolution.

The process of transformation can be vividly witnessed in my work with Esther, a janitor in a local Midwest school. Early in the study she says,

“...You know all I ask in my life is somebody to care for Esther, somebody to respect Esther. And Esther will respect that person. I have never had nobody respect me, care for me, be proud of me...my kids is the only way I can really...”

What was left unsaid was clear and painful. In her eyes she had nothing but her kids. They defined the purpose of as well as the place in her life. And what she sought could fill no more than the basic spaces in her being: respect, care, love. Instead there was a fragile instability, an emotional vulnerability, a dysfunctional emptiness, a denial of her inner needs as a special education women of color, while portraying her singular ability to both cope and confront her world on a public platform.

2. TOO COMMON A STORY

Esther was the last of ten children, the granddaughter of a plantation slave, reared in the Mississippi South, schooled in an all-black southern district but discriminated against because her skin, which her teachers often pinched, was so much darker than her classmates. While she was in first and second grades, she and the other children were physically struck with a paddle for the slightest misconduct. If someone in the class caused a disruption and the teacher were unable to tell who was at fault, the entire class was told to place their hands behind them and

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they were paddled. When Esther would plaintively present her reddened hands to her father, she was told she had undoubtedly deserved it.

“This is how they did. What else they’d know? That’s the way their parents did. And the white people used to whip them and they used to whip us. That just be how they raised.” (Interview, 3-18-2004).

In her entire class, Esther, a quiet reserved commonly built girl, received the most beatings. She was taunted by her classmates and by her teacher, mocked because she was so black and ‘slow’. At the age of sixteen, unbeknown to anyone else, Esther gave birth to her father’s baby girl. Ashamed that she had let this happen and knowing something wasn’t as it should be, she buried the baby under the front porch of the family’s house and never told anyone.

When she and her family moved North, the denial of her education continued on a new note. She was told she was a very slow learner and placed in the special education program, but not allowed to have any books. She felt devalued because she had difficulty in the classroom, denied the opportunity to ever learn to read—something which she hid from everyone, even her employers for she couldn’t even fill out a job application. Beaten first by her minister father and later by two husbands who knew more about hustling on the streets, more about doing time and doing drugs than about loving their wife and caring for their three children, Esther tried to make sense of her estrangement, her alienation from other students and the absence of care from her family. Opal Palmer Adida’s [1] speaks of Esther and of her conflicted experience when she writes,

“...stress is hemmed into our dresses, pressed into our hair, mixed in our perfume and painted on our fingers. Stress from the deferred dreams, the dreams not voiced; stress from the broken promises, the blatant lies; stress from always being at the bottom, from never being thought beautiful, from always being taken for granted, taken advantage of...” (61)

Esther recalls going to her special class every day.

“...I was tellin’ the teacher, somethin’ not right. I supposed to be in sixth grade not fourth grade. Why aren’t you helpin’ me to do better? I remember I bein’ at this desk with this thing like a partition between me and the other kids that goes way back. And I remember (she uses the teacher’s authoritative voice) ‘but I couldn’t function like other kids,’ But I wanted to learn”. (Interview 3-18,04).

In Esther’s mind, the partition separated her from everything: from the other kids, from her own people, from her education and even from herself. And when she told her parents there was something wrong, they simply said, “Out of ten kids, you the handicap.” And how did her family’s dismissal make her feel? Like she ‘got cheated out of life’. And yet she does not hold her parents accountable for she believes they knew no better. Given her father only went to the fifth grade and struggled even then, she felt he as well as her mother were both ‘slow learners’.

“When I was pregnant by my father when I was sixteen, I used to put my hand on my stomach and I used to say, Lord’ please don’t let my kids come out being slow learners.

Please let them come out being educated, smart. Let them be able to pick up things quickly.” (Interview 3-22-04).

Dismissed, denied and devalued by the system, she was labeled and written off by the only people who could have fought on her behalf. ‘Esther was just too slow’, they said.

Societies’ institutions had failed her as they had failed countless other special needs students who were Black women from the South, failed them, disavowed them and in essence had returned them to the plantation. In that part of her which should have experienced love, gaped an open wound, one inflicted by her father, by her family, by her teachers and by her husbands.

Her high school teachers categorized her, devalued her and neatly set her aside giving her books in which to color her way from grade to grade. The ugliest shadow of ignorance was the knowledge of the secret she read into everyone’s eyes, the sense that everyone knew that about which she was most ashamed—she could color, but ‘she could not read’.

How then can one speak of love, of self-identity, of self-recovery in terms of self-reclamation when the words on the printed page meant nothing? Esther experienced both a racism and a discrimination born of the cruelty of interracial discrimination and hatred of those who ‘could not learn’, which drove a system of subservience fueled by disenfranchised disempowerment. bell hooks writes, “Many of us were made to feel as children that the world was completely unsafe, hence our capacity for wonder was repressed and fear took its place” [2].

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Because of the overlapping spheres of dysfunction in Esther’s story, this paper attempts to deconstruct her experience using a critical theory perspective built on an ecological position and viewed through a biopsychosocial lens.

4. PROCESS AND POWER

Critical research strikes at the conscience in order to raise the issues of subdominance that are entwined in the fabric of our culture and according to Giroux (1992) to develop the notion of difference as a part of the common struggle to extend the quality of public life to all citizens. Without the support of effective programs for children with disabilities, Esther subsisted in the borders, which are formed in the language of transgressive power and dominance, a language spoken of special populations of generations past. It is the litany of silence, the discourse of exclusion, of the confrontation of loss of power, the discourse of difference. Conversely, critical race theory that embraced feminist perspectives, such as Esther’s, brought greater understanding to the study of families of color [3]. Her story is discussed here because it is an archetypal example of intersectionality in special populations. Intersectionality exists when social phenomenon such as colorism, thought by some to be more influential than race [4], class, gender, poverty, ethnicity, ability and other factors that simultaneously “shape people’s notions of self and others” [5].

However, in examining Esther’s story, in the absence of special services, Figure 1, which uses a biological frame to examine the complexity of loss, tends to offer a clearer understanding of the overlapping bogs of alienation about which Brofenbrenner speaks [6] than the intersection of dysfunctions.

The biological frame examines the nature of the loss and its affects on the physical body including altered sleep patterns, change in weight, blood pressure and blood sugar levels and use

of non-nutritional food such as junk food and caffeine, all descriptors of Esther’s life. The psychological examines Esther’s body’s response to varied losses and the perception of loss through stages of sadness, denial, anxiety, anger and dependency, while the sociocultural frame looks at relationships and support systems or lack thereof, as well as the role of spirituality and culture play in helping the individual understand loss and health [7].

As the stressors from the loss of home and school are translated into loss of control, a sense of detachment from friends, loss of social support and a sense of defeatism, the body negatively reacts as the mind translates these losses into lack of self-worth, self-abuse, other-abuse and the potential for any of the risk factors that now go unprotected [8]. The protective factors buffer the individual against the risk factors listed above. They assist young people in making reasoned decisions rather than engaging in destructive behavior, but only if they have family, school personnel and special support services people trained to assist in such dire situations.



Figure 1. Esther as a Contextual Being in Response to Lack of Special Needs Support

4.1 Colorism

More than poverty or physical abuse, the social construction of colorism played a dominant role in Esther’s struggle for self-worth, a struggle that was passed to her three children, particularly as they became adolescents. Socialized to believe she was denied the value of personhood due to her dark skin and reinforced by her nine siblings, her father and her teachers, Esther entered a new school in the North with little sense of hope. Living in the projects, she was socialized to believe the shade of her skin exacerbated and surpassed the stigma of poverty in which her family struggled and disabused her of the little hope she had for academic success—to be able to

read. Race and stratification research strongly suggest colorism affects ‘both psychological and socioeconomic outcomes’ [9].

5. THE FACE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION & EXPECTATIONS

Often expectations are self-fulfilling prophecies and such is born out with children of color. Educational expectations are overall lower for them, both from their teachers as well as from their parents who, themselves may not have attained a high level of education, may not have experienced success in school themselves, and who exert less support for the school and for their children’s success in it. The disparities in discipline are evidenced in Black Americans being suspended from school three times more than their white counterparts [10]. African American public school students are reported to be three times more likely to be categorized as in need of special education services than their white peers [11]. Both African and Native American males are overrepresented in three groups of disabilities: learning disabilities, mental retardation, and emotional disturbance [12].

When Esther was put in the special education track, she, too, experienced another level of stratification and disparity. There are twice as many boys as there are girls in U.S. special education classes. Classroom teachers are reticent to recommend girls for special education for they recognize the possibility of this additional level of isolation and the emotional and physical abuse that may come with it. Unfortunately a significant number of males in these classes are misplaced, for they are the result of white middle-class teachers who lack the cultural competence to deal with the behavior of males of color. As well, students of color may be underserved, misclassified or more often put in special education classes because of the disjuncture between teaching and learning. Often students of color are field-dependent, visual and concrete learners [13] while white middle class teachers are more frequently verbal, abstract and decontextualized in their teaching [14].

Such a disconnection may cause confusion, lack of learning and in Esther’s case another reinforcement of her inability to learn. And the problem or problems that led to Esther’s special education label, the lack of a motivating, culturally responsive classroom went unresolved for she was categorized as a “special education student”, irrespective of the precipitating factors that placed her there, regardless of the talents she had, the challenges she experienced and the eagerness to learn which she had long ago buried deeply within.

6. CONCLUSION

Without special services and teachers appropriately educated in working with students who may have border identities, disenfranchisement and its disablers will prevail. We must be prepared to see the pain caused, positions relegated, possibilities delineated and potentials denied. And we must search for ways through special education in which and for systems by which such brutal differences are reconciled. For if hurt is the home of hope, then Esther and women like her will never again return to the plantation.

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