Crossing Boundaries: A Brown & White Interrogation of Race and Social Class

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As graduate students in the Master of Education program at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, were were introduced to a repertoire of learning streams, one of which examined the social and cultural dimensions of teaching, learning, and knowledge. The following collaboration is a recollection of our life experiences; a very honest autobiographical account of our respective and markedly different racial contexts, as well as a discussion of our similar middle-class social backgrounds, and how the combination of these factors has influenced our academic achievements and our personal identities. Our hope is that readers recognize the growth in our self-awareness and ultimately understand how integral this process has been in our ability to be well rounded and effective educators.

Keywords: education, race, social class, white privilege, multiculturalism

Our experiences make us who we are. We have all come across this adage and while we agree with the general sentiment of this statement, we also believe that it is the context in which these experiences occur that shape our identities and beliefs. This paper will explore the markedly different racial contexts in which we grew up and how these differences shaped our educational ideas, and the varying experiences we had within our respective classrooms. As well, we will investigate our similar experiences of residing within a middle-income social class and how this factor contributed to our overall educational experience and personal identity.

Racial Differences & Educational Outcomes

Dawn

I grew up in what would be considered a rural town with a population of about 10,000. Approximately ninety-nine percent of that community was white. From the age of birth to four years of age, I had never encountered anyone who was not white and when I would see someone of colour on TV, I remember feeling that their presence on my television screen was not quite normal. When I was four, my mother attended the preservice program at OISE and I lived with my grandparents in a suburb of Toronto. My kindergarten classroom had only a handful of Caucasian children and the rest were of Asian descent. The fact that I was a minority in this classroom was unknown to me. I was as outgoing as I was the previous year in my all white junior kindergarten class. This oblivious attitude was aided by the fact that our curriculum materials, including the books that were read to us and the toys that we were given, featured mainly Caucasian characters. My teacher was also white, as were the large majority of the staff. This was perhaps the first time that I remember encountering what McIntosh (1989) would call 'white privilege'. Although at the time, I had no idea that this is what was occurring. Despite the diverse cultural backgrounds in my classroom, my birthday party that year consisted of the five

white children in my class. My mom remembers asking me if it might be nice to invite some of the other children and I looked at her like I had no idea what she was talking about. To me, there were no other students of importance in the class. She told me about this incident later in life when I would have the ability to understand the implications of my attitude. It was almost as if the first four years of my life had solidified for me that white was normal, which fits in with McIntosh's (1989) theory that white people are taught to, "…think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average and also ideal" (p. 1). For that year of my life, I tried my hardest to ignore anything that would suggest that I was not living in my 'normal' world. To attest to this fact, when I came back to my rural hometown for grade one, it was like that year had never transpired. I did not keep in touch with any of my classmates and I went on to forge new friendships in my all white world.

From grades one to six, I stayed within the same public school, which was so rural and so small that it has faced the threat of closure several times. I was white, as were all of the students that moved along with me. There was one Japanese family within the school but they were never in my split grade classrooms. I remember looking at them with a sense of exoticism when I would see them on the playground. My social outings were composed of my all white classmates, as were any extracurricular activities like Brownies, various sporting tournaments; even my Karate instructor was Caucasian.

For my intermediate years, I moved to a school that had grade seven and eight. Not surprisingly, about ninety-nine percent of my class was white. It didn't matter that I had gone from ten students in my grade to almost one hundred; culturally, I was not exposed to anything new in my educational setting. However, in grade eight, I did have my first travelling experience to the island of Antigua. Absolutely everyone there was dark skinned, except of course the

tourists. I enjoyed this experience for several reasons. After moving from my small K-6 school, I went from being a big fish in a small pond to someone who was not socially accepted. In Antigua, I was a young, white girl and the residents of the island, the males in particular, showered me with the attention that I was missing from my social relationships in my school environment. However, this experience did not help me to appreciate the culture of this beautiful Caribbean island. Instead, it solidified for me the notion of white idealism because I could see that these men were not paying the same attention to the females who resided on the island and the only difference that I noted was our skin colour.

For my high school experience, I moved to a small, rural public high school. I was once again back to being a big fish in a small, very white, pond. There was one girl in my grade of Japanese descent; however, she was so Canadianized that her differing background was never something that crossed my mind. I was not good friends with her but we were acquaintances and I held no ill feelings towards her. It was around high school that I started to develop very negative attitudes towards people of other ethnicities. I am not quite sure how this happened but I do believe that in high school, what we are exposed to has more influence on developing our individuality than our elementary school experience and it leaves an unquestionable imprint on our perceptions for many years. My experience with prejudice started very slowly with stereotypes expressed by the older students around me and developed into racist jokes and a solidified belief in white idealism by my late teens. I had very little opposition in regards to my prejudices, in fact everyone around me, with the exception of my mother and teachers, seemed to either agree with or ignore my attitude. I remember one incident toward the end of high school when an African-Canadian walked down the street past our school while my friends and I were walking to the general store. We treated the situation like an animal had escaped from the zoo,

questioning his presence with inane quips such as, "he must be here to rob the school" or "he probably just broke into someone's house." With absolutely no exposure to other cultures within our personal environment, we were completely ignorant of anyone who didn't look like us and relied on the stereotypes we were exposed to early on to form our perceptions.

Unfortunately, my experience in my first post-secondary degree did not do anything to alleviate my prejudice. While all post-secondary institutions obviously open someone like myself up to new cultural experiences, I chose mainly to avoid them. I did not have any friends who were not Caucasian, the majority of my professors were white and my favourite extra-curricular activities included frequenting the city's country themed bar and as I'm sure one could guess, there was very little diversity there. In fact, the individuals who frequented this establishment quite often held racist views. Coupled with the fact that I continued to socialize with an all-white social group, the entire experience did little to challenge my discrimination. During my preservice experience I found myself in a degree program that once again did not hold a lot of cultural diversity. As Sleeter (2001) points out, white students numerically dominate in preservice programs and my experience was no exception. While we were expected to be liberal and open minded individuals, I related to the students in Schick's (2000) article who were angry at the material covered by the multiculturalism courses. I felt that I should be apologizing for the advantages of being white and that I was being persecuted "by virtue of being white" (Schick, 2000, p. 92). This increased my resistance to anything I could have actually learned. My placements also did nothing to help my perceptions. Sleeter (2001) mentions that preservice students are typically placed in field experiences that were "reminiscent of their childhood" (Sleeter, 2001, p. 95). Reflecting on the schools that I was situated in, I could have easily been one of the students in her study. My first and third placements were in very small schools, with

the majority of the students being middle class and white. My second placement was in a lower socio-economic area but the students were again, mostly white. The minority students that I encountered were so assimilated into Canadian culture, I did not even think to identify them as racially different. I believe I would have truly benefited from a program like the community-based cross-cultural immersion experience indicated by Sleeter (2001). Having never been forced to look outside of my white world and educate myself through true cultural understanding, my prejudice was never truly challenged. It was not until I began teaching and was immersed in a multicultural city and classroom did I begin to see my intolerance and negativity, as I could no longer, "retreat to the comfort of a culturally familiar setting" (Sleeter, 2001, p. 97).

The two years that I spent teaching in Calgary were life-changing in a variety of ways. I was completely ripped out of the comfort of my small hometown and the cocoon of my parent's aid and support. I had to survive on my own in an environment that was totally foreign to me. The students in my classroom were unlike any I had ever experienced before; they were diverse, outgoing and unabashed with their cultural differences. My first year class was over 60% ESL and I had absolutely no idea how to educate or relate to them. Some of my students barely spoke English, which I found extremely trying at first. My stronghold on the concept of "whiteness" was forcefully being challenged (Schick, 2000). Gradually however, as I saw how these student adapted to their new environment in a manner that was much more efficient than mine, I truly began to appreciate them and the cultures that had given them this tenacity. They were hard working and driven to succeed, often much more than their white peers. When I met with their parents, they were supportive and desperately wanted to do anything that they could to aid in their children's education, as they knew this was key to their future success. Respect replaced

ignorance and I opened myself up to learning about all of my students, regardless of background. By the time second year rolled around, I rarely saw colour. I was fascinated to learn about all of the various cultures that I had within my room. I realized I had closed myself off to so much and truly stunted my growth as an individual. This was a major reason that I decided to come back home to Ontario and pursue my Master's degree. I now know that throwing yourself into uneasy situations is the absolute best way to learn as an individual. I also want to break down other barriers to become the best possible educator that I can be. This time around, I am so much more open to what is being taught to me that I feel like I am truly undergoing an educational enlightenment.

The extent to which I learned during my graduate degree versus my previous two undergraduate experiences is a testament to the fact that my previous racism was a detriment to my education. I will readily admit that during my public school education, being white in an all-white world afforded me several advantages. The materials that I learned from resonated with my cultural upbringing and the families around me looked like mine, giving me a sense of belonging that aided in my comfort at school. The language I spoke was the same language that I learned in, making it far easier for me to grasp the material. Basically these white privileges made me feel normal and the benefit of normalcy goes a long way in aiding one throughout their education. I had little adversity, very few challenges in regards to who I was and I coasted through my white world, as a white individual. However, the prejudices created by the ignorance of my own cultural context encouraged me to resist the vast opportunities afforded by post-secondary education both socially and academically. This reality stunted my personal and professional growth and when I entered my preservice program, I felt immature next to those who clearly had a more accepting and educated view of both global issues and their own identity.

I reacted by acting like the child in the classroom who resists learning and acts out because they are insecure about their abilities. Instead of challenging my misconceptions, I opted to dismiss any references to multicultural learning as unnecessary, effectively blocking any chance of this knowledge changing my attitude. Closing myself off to these tremendous learning opportunities is one of my few regrets in life but I am so grateful that my exposure through teaching and the continued insight of this degree program is helping me begin to build new bridges and repair the damage of my previous misconceptions.

Mubeen

I grew up in a quaint cul-de-sac that my Caucasian grade nine geography teacher would have referred to as a "tossed salad." I had a Filipino, Greek, and West Indian family living to my immediate right, and an Irish, West Indian, and Sri Lankan family living to my immediate left. A "tossed salad" is a multicultural haven where immigrants are free to express their authenticity without being compelled to assume a "Canadian" persona. Alternatively, as a second generation Indo-Canadian with a spicy palate, I am more inclined to agree with Amartya Sen's variation of a tossed salad and that is a "curry" (The Vancouver Sun, 2007). Sen's (2006) focus on the iconic curry dish in his book *Identity and Violence* highlights curry as being emblematic of the cultural exchange and dynamism brought to Britain (The Vancouver Sun, 2007). In the neighbourhood that I grew up in, this descriptor seems most fitting because one of the distinct markers of our ethnically rich community was the wafts of curry that pervaded our neighbourhood on Sundays; which is the day minority households typically dedicate to cooking for the week. Sen believes that the multiculturalism of "curry and change" is all about people meeting, talking, sharing food, and falling in love (The Vancouver, 2007). That is exactly the type of camaraderie and kinship that the residents of my neighbourhood established with one another. From exchanging

home cooked meals, to welcoming a new neighbour's kid, to everyone's children simply playing in the streets; our racial and ethnic identities were never under scrutiny in the neighbourhood but rather embraced. This is counterintuitive to Dawn's encounter with visible minorities in her hometown where being a visible minority was just that, stark and visible.

It is important to note that social and health scientists have found that one's social affiliation and cohesion within their neighbourhood may contribute to reducing the overall risk of morbidity or maladaptive functioning (Kawachi, 1999 as cited in Bradley & Cowyn, 2002). The more that the neighbourhood community engages in socialization practices and family lifestyles such as active problem solving, household organization, stimulating parenting, and adequate behaviour, the more likely it is that the neighbourhood will collectively benefit from their actions (Bradley & Cowyn, 2002). Harrell & Peterson (1992) found that neighbourhoods who maintain positive socialization and family management practices, also reinforce their self- and group identification, which "sustains customary behaviours and prevents deviant ones" (as cited in Bradley & Corwyn, 2002, p. 389). Therefore, in my neighbourhood, despite the colour of our skin and the markedly different traditions and belief systems embodied by our families, our community's sense of social belonging fostered strong intercultural exchange and pluralism enhancing our own unique collective identities and sense of belonging.

My experiences in school reflected my neighbourhood and the community culture that I grew up in. From Kindergarten to Grade 12, my classrooms were bursting with cultural diversity and ethnic pride, and it was the visible minorities that made up the majority of the student body in the schools that I attended. Ironically, the Eurocentric curriculums and predominantly white staff that taught us did not reflect our global classrooms, but I never questioned or objected to any of the material that l I was learning despite the absence of a minority voice for that was the

norm. The cultural landscape of my school also had its own norms. It was normal to see students of different races and ethnicities playing, talking, and laughing together at recess, bringing ethnic lunches to eat and share, and being exposed to a slew of different mother tongues throughout the day. Although I felt very much "at home" in the schools that I attended, I still had a difficult time associating my roots with a truly "Canadian" identity. To me, a "real" Canadian identity is what Norquay (1998) refers to as an Anglo or Anglicised identity. According to Norquay (1998), in order for white immigrants to gain or feel a sense of entitlement that goes with the Canadian identity, they needed to have English-sounding names. In elementary school, that was what I coveted the most, a simple Canadian name such as "Maureen" or my fellow colleague's name, "Dawn." On the one hand, I recognized that I was not white and that I was never going to be white. I also knew that my parents were never going to grant me permission to change my name, but I truly desired a name that was (in my opinion), Canadian and easy to pronounce. My name is unique, with a colourful Middle Eastern history and blended well within my school demographics. Apart from that, my name at the time was a phonetic conundrum for me, coaxing me into despising it and wanting to relinquish the culture associated with it. Years later however, although I do run into the odd variation of my name when somebody is pronouncing it for the first time, I find that my name now receives more compliments than furrowed gazes. Canadians have developed their flair for the exotic and I have a newfound appreciation for my name because of it.

University however, posed a new set of challenges for me. When it came time to start my undergraduate program, it was not my name that was the conundrum. Rather, my Indo-Canadian identity, values, and beliefs were put to the test by my parents. My parents believed, (and still believe) that education commands respect, recognition, and status. My mantra growing up as a

child was "education is the key to success in life." My parents made sure that I devoted every ounce of my time and energy towards excellence and achievement because failure was not an option. This is reinforced in studies that have shown that parental involvement in their children's academic endeavours is positively correlated with higher-achieving youth (Kao & Tienda, 1995). Moreover, based on the research conducted by Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore (1992), "immigrant households are more likely to have rules about grades and homework (rather than about household chores), which makes children aware that scholastic responsibilities assume primacy over other activities" (as cited in Kao & Tienda, 1995, p. 2). This was no exception in the household that I grew up in. My parents' cultural beliefs about the benefits of education meant that homework completion and additional review of coursework took precedence over any non-school related activities. To put it mildly, I did not have much time for leisurely activities such as watching television, internet surfing, or sleepover parties when success was at stake.

In addition to ensuring that I viewed education as a prerequisite for my future success, my parents also made it a point to predetermine my career path and defy gender roles dictated by society. That is, coercing me to pursue the sciences and ultimately striving to become a doctor. However, this directly contrasts the findings produced by Gambell and Hunter (2000) who determined that females do better in literacy based aspects of school, which Dawn was encouraged to pursue growing up. Initially, I went along with my parents and assumed the role that they so desperately wanted me to fulfill because according to Scheneider & Lee (1990), I felt "obligated" to my immigrant parents and believed that it was my responsibility to the family to succeed in school and shoulder the educational aspirations my parents were unable to attain (as cited in Kao & Thompson, 2003). It soon became apparent though after enrolling me in a math program and hiring a tutor for extra support, I was not going to excel or deliver the

scholastic achievements they were seeking. In accordance with Farver, Narang, and Bhadha (2002), I struggled to maintain a self and ethnic identity that was compatible with my parents' natal and host culture. Like many other Asian youth, as a result of these "conflicting allegiances," I experienced increased family conflict, heightened anxiety, low self-esteem, and performed mediocrely in school (Farver et al., 2002).

After travelling to the States to write the MCAT I had no ounce of passion for, I finally admitted to myself and to my parents that this was not an occupation that I wanted to pursue and presented an alternative direction, the route of education. After the initial switch, I felt as if a weight had been lifted off me, and I found myself actually enjoying my post-secondary education. My parents, needless to say, were disappointed and in a way felt personally rejected when I rejected the sciences, but they soon realized that I had a knack for the educational field. After a while it brought them joy to see me excelling without their intervention, and since then, they have supported me wholeheartedly. This directly corresponds with the findings by Martinez & Dukes (1997) and Phinney (1993), who concluded that adolescents who have achieved an ethnic identity and feel a sense of belonging with their group "have resolved uncertainties about the meaning of their ethnicity; feel comfortable with who they are; and experience relatively positive psychological adjustment in terms of high self-esteem, self-confidence, and a sense of purpose in life" (as cited in Farver et al., 2002, p. 339).

In my Bachelor of Education program, I learned to become an advocate for the students that I worked with. Since I was pigeonholed into carrying out my parents' educational aspirations for a good portion of my education, I knew that as a teacher, I wanted to take the opposite stance and support my students into pursuing their personal passions *regardless of their parental expectations,* because "real learning is passionate learning" (Peters, 2003 as cited in

Morris, 2006, p. 3). This means creating a classroom environment that promotes "more questions above answers, creativity above fact regurgitation, individuality above uniformity, and excellence above standardized performance" (Peters, 2003 as cited in Morris, 2006, p. 3). Thus, taking the time to respect and appreciate the areas that students are excelling at and transforming them into educational goals, is important in developing the holistic child and contributing to their overall future success.

Now that I am in my M.Ed, I am realizing more and more just how important it is for children to have educational curriculums that reflect them. Instead of celebrating however, the new pro-multiculturalism aspects of the Canadian curriculum, I was rather thrown off guard. Here I was a visible minority, and I was perplexed to see "brown" names instead of "white" names being mentioned in math problems that I was teaching to my practicum class. I should have felt rejoice, not troubled. Instead, having grown up with the Eurocentric curriculum my whole life and accepting it as a norm, ended up challenging my would-be sense of belonging and appreciation for the newfound inclusivity. Being a part of the social justice and multicultural education course in the preservice program, allowed me to transition from having a "white consciousness" to a "race consciousness" that is, it "increased my ability to be diverse" (Schick, 2000). It also increased my awareness of the positive pedagogical implications that multicultural and inclusive practices can have on both educators and students.

My personal struggle with race however did not end with embracing my name, following my own career path despite cultural expectations, or even overcoming the shock of a non-Eurocentric curriculum. My ongoing struggle with race becomes apparent to me, as soon as I step away from my own comfort zones. Beyond my natal city, the colour of my skin and not my mind is making judgements for me, resulting in my own uneasiness and drop in confidence. For

instance, when visiting my uncle and his family who live in a rural community, I suddenly became more acutely aware of how "different" I really am in contrast to the Caucasian community residing there. I found myself looking over my shoulder, and being deeply self-conscious that I was not "like everyone else." From visiting the super market to walking down the street, my "brown-ness" only became significant to me because the residents of these communities reacted and oriented themselves to the colour of my skin (Sundar, 2008). I found this observation quite shocking because within a matter of an hour, I went from being comfortable in my "own skin" to feeling uncomfortable and wanting to jump out of it somehow. According to Sundar (2008), who conducted a study on how young second-generation South Asian-Canadian men and women interpret and use their identities in various social environments, "youth actively negotiate various aspects of their environments and draw on their "identity capital" to make deliberate, strategic choices about whether to "brown it up" or "bring down the brown" within different human interactions" (pp. 251-252).

Growing up in the cultural comfort zone of my hometown, meant that I did not have to choose between "browning it up" or "bringing down the brown" because being "different" was accepted as the norm (Sundar, 2008). Although, the racial differences were apparent in the neighbourhood that I grew up in, they were not acknowledged in our everyday lives because it was a taken-for-granted fact (Sundar, 2008). Moreover, this also allowed me to develop a strong Indo-Canadian identity because the experiences and interactions that I had, reflected "positive perceptions of group membership" (Sundar, 2008, p. 254). Conversely, whenever I went back to visit my uncle and his family and confronted the "whiteness," race suddenly became important to me because according to Tatum (1997), racialized youth acknowledge their race only when others perceive them in that manner (as cited in Sundar, 2008). Hence, "despite not being "real"

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in a social or cultural sense, interactions between individuals play a critical role in producing particular views and meanings related to race" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Pincus, 2006 as cited in Sundar, 2008, p. 259). Therefore, I would "bring down the brown," lose my sense of being the "other," and resort to my Canadian roots because after all I was born and raised in Canada.

Being "Canadian" here though does not have a set-definition. I may be labelled as a "visible minority" where I grew up, but was never recognized as such until I visited my relative's rural community. Similarly, like many other second generation Canadians growing up here, I broke a lot of conventions. I won track awards which was supposed to be a "black" thing, excelled in art class over math class when the latter should have been my forte, and wanted a name like Maureen over Mubeen since I was five. But I would have never wanted to trade in my curry for crackers. Being "white" would not really have helped to solve the issues that I was dealing with, mainly lack of self-esteem and confidence in myself. By appreciating what I was truly good at, and recognizing my own strengths and potential, it has helped me to overcome my so-called race issues. It's never okay to live according to other people's perspectives and expectations of you based on your religion, race, culture, or gender. It takes a deep sense of courage to love oneself for *who* you are not *what* you are, a life lesson that I plan on teaching my future students.

Conclusion: Racial Differences & Educational Outcomes

It is very obvious that we had distinct experiences in regards to race and its effects on our education and other aspects of our lives. While these varying contexts should have led to contrasting experiences, surprisingly, this was not the case. Both of us were extremely comfortable in our given surroundings and thus, suffered none of the negative impacts to

learning that can occur from the anxiety of feeling like a foreigner in our environments (University of California, 2008). We believe that this was the result of both of our educational contexts meeting our individual needs. Dawn's hometown was decidedly white but because she was white, she had the privilege of feeling normal. Mubeen's neighbourhood was multicultural and far more advanced in its inclusiveness and therefore, she never felt like she did not belong. Regardless of our cultural differences, the contexts in which we both existed, afforded us both the advantage of differing cultural capital that we could use in our respective environments (Devine-Eller, 2005). However, had we switched places, we both would have had very different educational experiences that would have more than likely resulted in a negative impact resulting from our sense of cultural isolation.

Our final conclusion is derived from reviewing our experiences together. While Dawn's tale is told with a serious tone and filled with guilt and regret, Mubeen's account is clearly supported by straightforward honesty and humour. These tones are the result of several conditions. Until Dawn removed herself from her segregated and culturally monotonous world, the idea of the superiority of whiteness had permeated her thoughts. However, becoming a much more liberal, mature and educated individual, has taught Dawn the error of her thinking. Realizing that she has spent the vast majority of her life in such a disillusioned state, makes her reflections about her past experiences with race relations a very negative and sombre tale and has resulted in what is often known as 'white guilt' (Apple, 2000). Mubeen on the other hand was raised in an environment where race was not even a part of her consciousness and therefore, she has no history of racial discrimination to look back upon with remorse.

Social Class Similarities & Educational Outcomes

Although our cultural contexts and experiences were in stark opposition to each other, when we explored the circumstances of our social class, we found that our situations were exceedingly similar. Both of us would primarily describe our family's position in society as being middle-class. There were times when there was more or less money for extras but neither of us ever felt that we went without. We both grew up in comfortable homes, in a family unit that included our two birth parents and one younger sibling. While we grew up in neighbourhoods that looked different in terms of their racial composition, we could count on our neighbours to belong in the same social class as us.

This afforded us several advantages, such as attending middle-class schools. Much research has been done on achievement and social class and it has been shown time and again that the achievement scores in middle-class schools are higher than those in lower income areas (Taylor, 2006). Based on our experiences we believe this to be true for a variety of reasons. For example, while attending our middle-class schools we knew that our parents would never let us worry about not having the necessary equipment for class, textbooks to learn from, the monetary means to attend trips and extracurricular activities, all in an effort to ensure that we had positive educational outcomes. We also had a clean and safe environment in which to do our homework which was equipped with current technology to aid in our studies. According to Alexander et al (1994), our parents' belief in the importance of education was crucial to the structuring of this kind of home and educational environment and this helped to ensure that we would excel in our schooling endeavours (as cited in Davis-Kean, 2005).

An additional factor that we believe was related to our social class was the fact that we could also be sure that our parents would meet our basic needs. They would send us to school with nutritious food in our stomach from breakfast and we could rest assure that there would be more to come at lunch. As well, we knew we would be outfitted with the proper seasonal clothing. These factors allowed us to have our base physiological needs met, which according to Maslow, is an absolute necessity in achieving our higher needs, including the desire and ability to learn (Huitt, 2007). Compared to students who come from a lower-class home, who may come to school hungry or exhausted from a night of having to care for younger siblings, we were afforded the privilege of being able to focus on being children. In doing so, we were carefree and possessed a sense of curiosity and wonder in our academic experiences that can only come from feeling safe, secure and well loved.

Another similarity that we encountered that we see arising from our social class, is the fact that education was made a top priority by our parents, which was evident by our efforts to both excel in our studies, as well as attend post-secondary institutions. Despite the fact that our parents had differing education levels, they were all adamant that their children be well educated. This finding was not inconsistent with the Davis-Keane (2005) article that found a positive correlation between social class and parental expectations in education. Also coinciding with Davis-Keane's (2005) findings was the fact that reading played an important role in our homes, as did child-parent play. It has also been proven that high-SES parents "engage their children in more conversations…..and provide more teaching experiences" (Shonkoff & Phillps, 2000 as cited in Bradley & Cowyn, 2002, p. 12). That is, conversations are richer, contain more contingent responsiveness, and include more efforts to elicit child speech (Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardif, 1995; Hart & Risley, 1995 as cited in Bradley & Corwyn, 2002); and that the teaching

style includes more scaffolding and complex verbal strategies (Borduin & Henggeler, 1981 as cited in Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). These kinds of experiences, "provide both direct and indirect (i.e., mediated through more capable peers and adults) learning opportunities for children as well as serving as a motivational base for continued learning" (Saegert & Winkel, 1990 as cited in Bradley & Corwyn, 2002, p. 11). We believe that our increased experiences with literacy and play, coupled with other parental priorities like rich educational discussion and homework support, resulted in the positive achievement effects reported by Davis-Keane (2005).

Furthermore, related to providing us with a cognitively stimulating environment, our parents also strived to afford us the emotional support necessary for optimal learning. In the case of connecting SES and children's social and emotional well-being, there is strong evidence to suggest that children of low-SES parents are more likely to "manifest symptoms of psychiatric disturbance and maladaptive social functioning than children from more affluent circumstances" (Bradley & Cowyn, 2002, p. 7). As a result, this psychosocial imbalance can hinder their overall achievement outcome. Additionally, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) also found that parents who implement cognitively stimulating and emotionally safe environments also regularly adjusted the home environment to meet the needs of their children, based on academic performance results communicated by the school (as cited in Davis-Kean, 2005).

Finally, we were both fortunate enough to have our undergraduate and preservice education funded by our parents. While we both received various scholarships and bursaries for academic achievement, the bulk of our tuition and living expenses were covered. We see this almost as the cumulative advantage of our social class. Not only did our social class help us to earn the grades and provide the drive necessary for post-secondary education, we would continue to be advantaged by tremendous financial support. As anyone who has attended post-secondary

education knows, attempting to juggle a job, along with your studies and extra-curricular activities can be very challenging. The stress of worrying about student loans only adds to this burden. Much like having our basic needs covered in public school allowed us to be kids who were prepared to learn. Having our expenses covered in post-secondary then allowed us to be young adults whose focus was obtaining the knowledge necessary for our careers. We both knew several students who were so focused on paying for their education that they could never sit back and enjoy their learning experience. This distraction no doubt impeded the success that they could have experienced academically. Additionally, a major benefit of not having to combine employment and studying was an excess of time. We had the time to attend all lectures, the time to read our materials and the time necessary to study for tests. We were not scheduling our learning around a job. We also had the time to socialize and enjoy our learning experience in other ways, keeping us emotionally healthy. All of these factors resulted in us having a less stressful educational experience and it has been shown that an absence of anxiety is advantageous to learning (University of California, 2008).

Conclusion: Social Class Similarities & Educational Outcomes

It was perplexing to us that while we had similar social class backgrounds, our racial differences did very little to skew our academic experience and success. Regardless of racial differences, we both had positive elementary and secondary school experiences, in which we felt a sense of security and belonging. We both strongly believed in the importance of education and in turn enrolled in multiple post-secondary degrees. Finally, we have both decided to continue our passion for learning by becoming educators ourselves. As we delved further into the research we discovered some reasons for this reality. Parental education, occupation, and family income are common variables and thus strong predictors of eventual academic achievement among youth

(Kao & Thompson, 2003). Moreover, the differentiation among these social class variables is substantial across race, ethnic, and immigrant groups, and greatly influences the variation in educational outcomes of youth (Kao & Thompson, 2003). What is more, is that Bradley and Corwyn (1999) found that this disparity between parental attitudes, expectations, and styles between low-SES and high-SES parents, is consistent from infancy to adolescence, as well as with children from diverse ethnic backgrounds (as cited in Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Additionally, Lareau (2003) stipulates in her book, *Unequal Childhood: Class, Race, and Family Life*, that there are very few instances in which racial experiences trump those of social class (as cited in Devine, 2005). Furthermore, Lareau (2003) also states that families of varying racial backgrounds have similar child rearing practices within the same social class (as cited in Devine, 2005) which is consistent with the Bradley and Corwyn (1999) findings. Out of these findings, we have concluded that while our racial contexts were important in shaping our individual perceptions and identities, our social class played a more significant role in our educational experiences and decisions. In essence, social class did trump race in our circumstance.

Conclusion

Based on our critical examination of our sociocultural contexts, with respect to race and social class and its effect on our educational outcomes, there is no doubt that these contexts from which we drew our experiences played an integral role in shaping our identities and beliefs. Looking back, it is evident that our ethnic base of values, behaviours, beliefs, and day-to-day ways of doing things were strongly influenced by our familial, neighbourhood, and educational communities. As educators, it is these experiences that have contributed to how we define our sense of self, our sense of learning and our sense of education (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999). As teachers, we need to create learning environments that foster understanding and respect. Our

future goal consists of teaching in an unbiased manner that both promotes and combines the cultural landscape of our classrooms into our teaching methods. It is beneficial for the students as well as the teachers to feel a sense of belonging in the classroom, which will only be achieved once our sociocultural norms and attitudes are integrated rather than stated within learning environments.

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