

# **Using Literature in Learning Contexts to Address Contentious Issues of Difference, Culture, Power, and Privilege in the Classroom**

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## **1. Abstract:**

Fictional literature provides a vehicle for students to discuss power issues and thus achieve a better understanding of identity politics and systemic barriers that shape people's lives. This paper examines the use of fiction to explore difficult issues such as race, gender, culture, power, and privilege, and ways to promote these kinds of discussions amongst teacher candidates. The kinds of ethical dilemmas often posed in works of fiction complicate what our notion of power is, who produces it, and how it is disseminated or regulated. My argument characterizes the kinds of subtle and more explicit rhetoric used by teacher candidates who prefer a neo-liberal stance, and I critique the logical fallacies which undermine prejudiced viewpoints. If teacher candidates are able to experience firsthand the power of literary discussions to mediate and negotiate their own views held on certain issues, it is more likely they will use literature themselves as a tool to discuss contentious issues with their own future high school students, rather than shying away from these matters altogether, or allowing their own unchallenged biases to impede interactions with their students. Finally, I provide a few practical suggestions around literary texts and strategies for the professor

whose area is not English Language Arts, yet wishes to engage his/her teacher candidates in these kinds of dialogues.

***Key Words:***

. Critical Literacy; power; fiction; hegemony; teacher education programs

**2. Introduction**

To some extent, all of us have prejudices and underlying assumptions about other people and cultures. Prejudices tend to flourish when left unchallenged and in silence. Yet realistically, very few people in their entire lives ever participate in any type of public forum where they openly discuss the difficult, sensitive issues pertaining to such underlying assumptions. We hardly have the language for these kinds of discussions because there are so few opportunities to practice speaking about contentious issues. Fictional literature provides a vehicle for students to discuss power issues and thus achieve a better understanding of identity politics and systemic barriers that shape people's lives. This paper examines the use of fiction to explore difficult issues such as race, gender, culture, power, and privilege, and ways to promote these kinds of discussions amongst teacher candidates. Teacher candidates are asked to enter into discussions about literary fiction, which allows them to examine issues without necessarily feeling they have to disclose about their personal lives, yet in talking about the literature, they indirectly confront their own intersections of privilege and oppression that shape their personal experiences. This paper explores the process of engaging students in literary discussion with the purpose of uncovering individual and systemic

underlying prejudices, and it reviews some of the literature that supports this approach to analyzing contentious issues.

The power of fictional narrative is that it is rooted in our emotional lives. Although it is the product of imaginations, fiction can shape perceptions in real life in unexpected ways. Teacher candidates are often shocked at how deeply felt their emotional as well as their intellectual responses may be, not only to a fictional text, but also to the kinds of intense discussions that may develop and ensue in class. The kinds of ethical dilemmas often posed in works of fiction complicate our notion of what is power, who has power, who produces it, and how it is disseminated or regulated. I define literary analysis in this paper as a combination of close reading techniques and literary theory that draws on political, social, and cultural contexts to situate a text. Close reading techniques involve examining passages from a chosen literary text in great detail using literary devices such as diction, symbolism, and tone. Often this kind of analysis provides deeper understanding of the text in general, and a close reading of a significant passage can then be related to overarching themes. This kind of literary analysis is a product of New Criticism (the dominant trend in western literary criticism from the 1920's to 1960's), which tends to look at a text in isolation. However, close reading techniques can be used in combination with other literary theories. For example, a feminist, Marxist, or postcolonial lens in conjunction with close reading techniques further extend and politicize the critical framework of texts by situating them in historical, cultural, and social contexts.

In this paper, I argue for the need for teacher education programs to incorporate literature across the curriculum where it is feasible as a means to introduce teacher

candidates to issues around equity and social justice. I contend that there is a strong rationale for using literature to create a forum in which teacher candidates feel comfortable discussing difficult issues. I draw on my own personal experiences of teaching in a pre-service program in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. Our Faculty of Education has one of the most diverse full-time faculty in all of Canada, and the number of people of heterogeneous backgrounds entering the program has increased. Perhaps because of our diversity, teacher candidates express a range of opinions and emotions related to issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, power, and privilege. In this discussion, my argument characterizes the kinds of subtle and more explicit rhetoric used by teacher candidates who prefer a neo-liberal stance, and a critique of the logical fallacies which undermine prejudiced viewpoints. If teacher candidates are able to experience firsthand the power of literary discussions to mediate and negotiate their own views of certain issues, it is more likely they will use literature themselves as a tool to discuss contentious issues with their future high school students, rather than shying away from these matters altogether, or allowing their own unchallenged biases to impede interactions with their students. Finally, I provide a few practical suggestions around literary texts and strategies for the professor whose area is not English Language Arts, yet wishes to engage his/her teacher candidates in these kinds of dialogues.

### **3. Using Literature to Address Contentious Issues in the Classroom**

By using literature – which could be any genre: a short story, play, poem, or novel – we may move the discussion beyond just the personal anecdote or what are generally accepted truisms in contemporary society such as “violence against marginalized

groups is bad.” The starting point in such conversations usually needs to be an investigation of the language itself: how do we define terms such as “violence” and “marginalized groups” in the context of the literature? Understanding the complexities of how multi-layered language can be in and of itself often opens a new window into understanding power dynamics for many students. For instance, is “violence” referring to a physical, emotional, or verbal attack? Is it subtle or explicit? When violence does happen, is it a short burst or is it sustained over a long period of time? Is the violence in the text amongst just individuals and to what degree do issues of class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and race play into the conflict? Is there a historical pattern that can be traced in the violence? Are there larger institutional powers that have a silent, yet forceful role, in ensuring that hegemony reproduces itself? When these kinds of questions are asked about most pieces of fiction, the politics of power are highlighted and teacher candidates are able to start to interrogate for themselves underlying ideologies that govern how society functions. In a Canadian study about teacher candidates’ reactions to discussions about white privilege, Solomon et al. (2005) note many novice educators experience “a range of emotions including anger, guilt and paralysis. Preparing the students for these expectations can serve two primary purposes: (a) they will realize that their behavior or responses is normal and acceptable depending on the stage they are in with their analysis of issues regarding oppression and; (b) it also prevents them from using their experience and emotions as a rationale for not engaging in the anti-racism work that needs to be done” (p. 164).

Literature tests out social values. I recall when I was a teaching assistant at graduate school observing a first year undergraduate class in which a professor was

responding to a student who asked about God's view in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1927), and the professor replied, "Where is there God in this novel? He doesn't exist in the context of this book." For this Mennonite student, I think it was a rather earth-shattering moment. The fiction and the discussion of that fiction made her re-examine her own worldview, which up to that point had made the assumption that God must be embedded in every one's perspective and culture. The conversation that ensued involved the entire class now trying to prove or disprove the professor's claim. They sought evidence from the novel and society in general (both historical and contemporary examples) to support their points of view. Students had to draw on previous knowledge to connect to their understanding of the novel, and form value judgments of the characters, their actions, and their motivations. Similar impassioned discussions happened again with the same novel in relation to anti-Semitic and racist comments made by one of the characters. Certainly this is a text that comes from the traditional canon of "high literature," yet it raises contentious issues which act as a tool for opening up discussions. Although there may have been discomfort for students who were going beyond their usual way of thinking about the world, they did participate in the discussion. Literature often makes students feel they are in a safer space to voice their opinions, and in good literary discussions it becomes evident quickly that there is always room for individuals to revisit and revise previous assumptions.

With reference to Chinua Achebe's famous deconstruction of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which Achebe suddenly realizes as a black man he should identify with the voiceless black natives on the side of river rather than the white captain's first-person narrative, Dittmar and Leistyna (2008) argue,

What is especially useful about the discussions (and sometimes heated debates) he [Achebe] provokes is their ability to steer us, students and teachers, not only towards thinking about the little known, colonized "other," but towards reflecting about the unknown "us" as agents in the present neo-imperialist processes under way. The colonizer's imagination – manifest in ways we write and read, interpret and debate – can itself come under scrutiny, exposing the brute imperial privileges that are routinely masked by the ideology we inhabit. (p. 5)

Teaching literature and using literary analysis in a variety of content areas to improve the chances of teacher candidates engaging in greater self-reflection may seem like an odd proposition at first. Most pre-service programs assume literature will only be found in the English Methodology course. Yet literature can provide an excellent venue to overcome the resistance and self-defensiveness often seen in teacher candidates, who may otherwise shut out any discussions around contentious issues, perhaps feeling self-righteous in their entrenched views. It is hard to take on the role of "other" in an empathetic fashion or to question one's own responsibilities in culturally identifying with a position of privilege. Or furthermore, as Dittmar and Leistyna (2008) point out, for white people to even acknowledge "whiteness" as a social category, and that what is constructed as white should bear scrutiny for its political and cultural implications. Literary analysis, which allows the reader to forego personal agency temporarily as s/he explores the fictive world with no commitment to having that world become a part of his/her fixed identity, might make it an effective model for transformative pedagogical praxis. Reading literature forces individuals to see and feel

the world through different eyes. The pieces of fiction used in various content areas could be as short as a poem or a two-page short story, so they do not have to replace other key course material. Yet by including this literary approach to contentious issues, the professor may have greater success in building empathy in teacher candidates for how lives distinct from their own are fashioned.

#### **4. Drawing on Literary Theory and Contemporary Texts to Inform Discussions**

It is unrealistic to expect a change of attitude that addresses prejudice in teacher candidates by simply providing them with texts that are considered culturally diverse because these texts include characters or settings that represent the “other.” There has to be some literary analysis provided through instructional scaffolding or Socratic dialogue. This literary analysis may draw on various schools of Marxist, feminist, and post-colonial theories that question how power is a productive as well as an oppressive ever-changing force that never lies in the hands of one group, without at least minor shifts in who has (arbitrary) control at the institutional level. These ideological underpinnings need to be skillfully drawn out, but hopefully not through a professor’s lectures. Teacher candidates need to experience firsthand modeling of a student-centred approach. If they are to go on to use literature as a venue to discuss contentious issues with the high school students they teach, then they have to feel comfortable that they know what it would “look like” through having experienced it themselves. Even teacher candidates who have English as their main content area often do not feel prepared to teach literature that is provocative and contemporary.

For instance, I have tried to introduce teacher candidates to two contemporary well-known Canadian authors – Nicole Markotić and Suzette Mayr. Markotić’s *Minotaurs and*



*other alphabets* (1998) is a book of poetry prose that discusses female desire from a feminist stance that – for example – describes female anatomy in precise detail in the context of women’s desiring bodies so as to reclaim anatomical words for women and to raise issues around who gets to decide how language will be used. Suzette Mayr’s *Venous Hum* (2004) is a satiric novel in which, half way through, you find out the lesbian protagonist is black, even though her name Lai Fun would suggest she is of Chinese descent. Mayr constantly undermines the reader’s expectations, especially when the high school reunion that Lai Fun is miserable about attending, is attended by the undead and vampires, and she is one of the latter. Both books use graphic verbal images and some swear words, which for most teachers, would probably require a discussion with the Department Head and a letter to be sent home to parents to explain the choice of text. However, these two examples of literary texts definitely challenge preconceived notions of power relations. They are enjoyable, even if at times difficult reading material. In class conversation, several teacher candidates, who recognize these books as worthy literature, have also indicated they fear teaching these sorts of novels because they do not know how parents or students will handle material of this nature.

I think teachers often choose literature that has been canonized in anthologies or recognized through established literary awards in part because they feel it will be safe from school or parental censure. Although books such as *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *1984* definitely raise contentious issues, use graphic images, and swear words, they are so clearly within the auspice of the traditional canon and anthologized, that a teacher does not worry about outside disapproval.

Interestingly, at least in Ontario, where I live, the Ministry of Education's curriculum does not mandate what literature we must teach beyond general guidelines around including diversity and all genres. So, it is teachers who are self-regulating their choices of what not to teach. I hope that teacher candidates' exposure to various pieces of literature and questions that draw on feminist, Marxist, and post-colonial critiques within the pre-service program will help overcome some of this fear. From my five years of experience teaching at the high school level, I believe secondary students are often more prepared to deal with serious issues in literature than adults are willing to give them credit for. There is something very freeing about studying a book that just came out last year and for which no literary criticism has yet been written. The students know from day one there can be no reliance on outside sources to help them through their interpretation of the material. They also learn that writing is a current practice in our society today, and not just the realm of dead authors. Working with contemporary literature can often lead to more genuine engagement with readers, which in turn can provide an excellent venue for any teacher to delve into fiction, which so often challenges our perspectives and shapes our lives in real ways.

## **5. Challenges and Benefits of Teaching Contentious Issues Using Literature**

The advantage of teaching about power issues using literature is that no one has to enter into a confessional discourse or reveal personal information about him or herself. The teacher candidate can still bring personal knowledge to the discussion without feeling the threat of being judged. Reader Response theory argues that students are more likely to participate if they have the opportunity to form their own opinions about a text without fear of getting an incorrect answer. In addition, all people participating in the

discussion have access to the same story. This provides a more level playing field because the information is shared and everyone can refer to the text itself throughout the process of interpretation. Thus, the other students are not dependent on just hearing one person's story and necessarily accepting that version of it. More importantly, by having the text right there, the nuances of language and tone can be analyzed by all participants. This is often key to being able to pinpoint the subtleties of racism or misogyny. It is also central to understanding how divergent interpretations of the same material can be made. So if a variety of content areas in pre-service programs such as history, individual and society, or law and ethics use literature as a tool to discuss contentious issues, student teachers have multiple opportunities from distinct perspectives to practice challenging others and being challenged themselves on their views.

It is often very challenging to facilitate a class that raises difficult questions about race, gender, sexual orientation, or ability. This is where on-site teaching is most effective, although sometimes potentially explosive. Any discussion is going to depend greatly on the demographics in the classroom. It is important that students know up front that they can ask any questions but how they state a question or make a comment must be respectful. Since people are not often given the opportunity to voice their opinions on sensitive issues such as race, sexual orientation, or gender in a room of people they may not know well, displacing the focus onto analysis of the narrative mode increases the likelihood of individuals willing to converse. Generic questions such as "do you believe in feminism?" or one-paragraph scenarios meant as conversation-starters quite often leave students feeling uneasy and lead to flat discussions.

Of course, in any such discussions, it is important that the facilitator ensures that those students of colour or women are not put in the position of the group looking to them as the spokesperson for all marginalized persons; it is not their responsibility, nor should they be made to feel uncomfortable in the classroom. Furthermore, white people should not assume they are not also responsible for the history of racism. However, through literature white learners may begin to realize some of the unspoken privileges that benefit them (McIntosh, 1992). While students will most likely have a range of responses, a compelling fictional narrative may engage students' empathy when the narrative they are reading invites them to perceive the world through distinct characters' viewpoints. Hart (1998) discusses the challenges of trying to have students from different racial and cultural backgrounds engage respectfully with one another. It may provide an opening for students to reveal some of their own experiences of having been discriminated against, and for others to question some of their own assumptions about how certain behaviour is culturally produced.

For an educator who does not teach literature, it may seem rather daunting to envision how to engage students in any sort of literary discussion. I would like to offer some practical suggestions that draw upon techniques often deployed in literature classes; these are scaffolding techniques that can be easily adapted to any content area. Some common activities in any literacy or literature course that work effectively are: 1. Get teacher candidates to hand write for fifteen minutes a response to a key question you ask about the piece of fiction, and then get some of them to share their responses aloud to prompt discussion. Every teacher candidate engages in writing, this means every person in that room is thinking. They will look more deeply at the material

if they have already written about it before delving into the group's shared ideas. This activity works best if the professor also journals at the same time, modelling the free writing process, and then towards the end of the discussion shares his/her own writing on the literary piece. 2. Have each teacher candidate choose one line from the fictional piece, and say why they think it is significant or the sorts of questions it raised, as a starting point for the conversation. 3. Get them to do a concept map in which they explore the hierarchical relation between concepts using linking words to define and establish what the relationships might be. 4. Use a chart graphic organizer in which you provide three key metaphors from the fictional piece listed each in a row. Across the top in three columns, teacher candidates identify the speaker/context; comparison being made and why it is significant; and a word to describe the tone established through the metaphor. Although I am using literary devices to describe the two latter activities, they are actually very simple visuals that are quite easily accessible to any student, and these activities get students working through challenging ideas on their own rather than requiring the teacher to lead the discussion or exploration of ideas.

Despite the challenges of teaching about race, culture, power, and privilege, it is important that educators develop strategies to address these difficult issues. Using literature can be an effective means for encouraging teacher candidates to challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions, to gain empathy for others, and to create a learning environment that focuses more on diversity, equity, and social justice. In this next section, I describe some of the resistance to teaching contentious issues I have personally encountered amongst teacher candidates before looking at how literature can play a role in overcoming the teacher candidates' fears.

## **6. Pre-Service Teacher Education and Issues of Diversity**

In my experience of working with pre-service teachers planning to teach in the intermediate/senior division, similar kinds of objections are raised as to why teacher candidates believe they should not have to address questions of race and various forms of oppression in their own studies. The same teacher candidates who openly and willingly participate in literary discussions are sometimes almost sullen and resentful when these same issues are treated using non-fiction education articles. They are mostly students who have chosen English as one of their teachable subject areas, which in part explains why they are more disposed to literary discussions. But it surprises me that the same teacher candidates who have honest and candid discussions about sensitive issues like race and all of its complexities when talking about fiction find the same issues so unappealing and seem to have greater disjuncture in their thought process when using non-fiction. I conjecture that especially for white, middle-class students, there is a greater sense of culpability when they read non-fiction studies that ostensibly highlight white privilege.

While this is only based on my own personal observations, I have identified a pattern of similar responses. Teacher candidates tend to argue along the following lines. They say that "Talking about these issues will only increase racism because students will be made uncomfortable. Others will question "Isn't it best to just deal with these issues as they arise?". While still other teacher candidates claim, "I can address issues of race, gender, etc. by only talking in terms of general inclusion. For example, if I talk about bullying, I don't need to identify any one marginalized group. There is no need to get specific." These responses indicate some resistant teacher candidates do not feel a

responsibility to clearly articulate how racism (to focus on one form of oppression) must be owned as the responsibility of everyone. It also presents race as neutral rather than political. In the words of Giroux, “Questions of representation and inclusion suppress any attempts to call into question the norm of whiteness as an ethnic category that secures its dominance by appearing to be invisible” (2005, p. 89).

In a school setting, if it is the school-wide message to say that “we stand united against any form of oppression,” and this is to be seen in actions as well as words – then an important, explicit part of that message is that the school embraces *this* as the norm in the school culture. It is then not just one or two teachers who decide to challenge cultural practices that perpetuate stereotypes, but the whole school that continually affirms a safe and celebratory space for diversity. Many teacher candidates fear repercussions from their principals or parents if what they teach is considered too political, and they do not see teaching about difficult societal issues as part of their professional responsibilities. Their desire to use only very neutral material and treat the classroom space as separate from contentious issues emerges out of a fear that they will be penalized for politicizing their own students. Thus, it does have to be a school-wide initiative to consciously raise issues of class, race, gender, ability and advocate for individual teachers who see this as a form of critical thinking. In this way, social justice is upheld as truly part of educational practice.

The teacher candidates’ argument that we should “only take up these questions as they become an issue” is problematic because this suggests a reaction to something negative that has already occurred. Teachers need to be more pro-active. If a teacher is silent and never raises issues of oppression, they preserve the dominant culture’s

fixation on white, middle-class culture as the norm without acknowledging issues of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or disability. Students who have been marginalized might perceive this as the teacher being indifferent or potentially negative. If a teacher has never stated views that reveal a sympathy for students in positions of marginalized power, especially if that teacher visibly represents the dominant culture, then that teacher's sympathies or lack thereof are an unknown quantity. The student has no reason to naturally turn to him or her expecting empathy or to see that teacher as an ally. What we decide to *not* say or *not* include in course curricula is just as important as what we do include; after all, we choose the overarching framework for our students.

It can sound very much like lip-service if we talk in generalities about how diversity is welcomed in our classrooms, but we never show that in practice. We can say we are inclusive teacher practitioners, but if there is no action, then we are seen as possibly untrustworthy and suspect by students who have experienced marginalization in their lives. "Action" in a classroom setting can be defined as referring to the ideas we choose to explore with students – through conceptual frameworks, examples, and representations. I argue that interpreting literature as a way of critiquing societal power and identity formation is also an act of promoting inclusiveness. Teacher candidates who resist the idea that these issues need to be articulated probably have never experienced any serious degree of discrimination themselves, and want to believe that if people try to live in peace and harmony without addressing issues of difference in racial diversity, they will be the happier for it. Giroux interprets Audre Lorde's commentary on the arrogance of academics studying feminism without acknowledging differences by



noting that “in this refusal of difference lie the seeds of racism and homophobia. She [Lorde] recognizes that whites have a heavy cultural, political, and affective investment in ignoring differences” (2005, p. 101).

There is a logical fallacy in the teacher candidates’ argument that if we talk about issues of race, it will perpetuate stereotypes and produce more racism. Knowledge is power. To critique our discourse and society where oppression is normalized in all sorts of oblique forms is to give agency to individuals to resist and at least understand that what is considered “fair” is not properly representative at the individual level (it is not just a matter of a strong work ethic when the playing field is neither equal nor equitable).

## **7. A Venue for Equity and Social Justice in Teacher Education**

We need to give teacher candidates a language to be able to talk critically about these issues. Teacher candidates may put up these defences because they feel these are taboo topics, and they are too explosive. They do not know how to deal with high school students who in an open discussion might make racial slurs and not even see them as slurs, or the students who sit silently through such discussions, or the ones they might find crying and upset in the hallway after school. They have a point: teacher candidates deserve to be trained in how to mediate these kinds of difficult discussions. They need an expanded understanding of educational theory and practical suggestions, and they need to see this modelled in their own education courses. Teacher education programs in Canada should work out of a social justice framework where social justice issues are not addressed on an ad hoc basis depending on the instructor’s personal interest in such matters.

Personal reflection is not enough to promote empathy if students have never been exposed to the mechanisms of discrimination. In most contemporary education programs in Canada, there is a strong emphasis on the need for teacher candidates to reflect on their own emerging teacher identity. Teacher identity is usually discussed in a self-reflexive way, whereby professors try to establish what is students' prior knowledge about teaching, what are their aspirations, and what are some of their social values. Teacher candidates often state they want to become teachers so as to make a positive difference in the lives of others. In this role, they envision themselves as creative developers of curricula, as confidantes to students' lived problems, as leaders in the school culture. They may be influenced by their own high school experiences, which quite likely were positive. Also, their dream of making a difference could possibly be informed to some degree by North American popular culture "teacher movies" that show the educator as making a personal connection with his/her students, using innovative teaching strategies, and passionately decrying a system that does not show the same caring while s/he, against the odds, inspires the students to new personal insights and motivates altruistic learning.

Teacher candidates need to be asked to explore their identity as teachers in ways that politicize and racialize their understandings of the self in societal and academic contexts. The purpose of reflection to explore teacher identities should be less about affirming the teacher candidate's idealizations about the profession and more about examining how we as individuals position ourselves. As a white, middle-class woman, I, for example, cannot speak for the experiences or from the position of various minority voices. I can only, as Giroux puts it, "speak self-reflectively from the politics of [my] own

location about the issue, which implicate in their web of social relations all those who inhabit public life, though from different spheres of privilege and subordination (2005, p. 27). As Frances Maher describes,

by 'positionality' we mean a concept articulated by Linda Alcoff (1988) and others, namely that of gender, race, class, and other aspects of our identities are markers of relational positions rather than essential qualities. Knowledge is valid when it includes an acknowledgment of the knower's specific position in any context, because changing contextual and relational factors are crucial for defining identities and our knowledge in any given situation the fashioning of one's own voice in the classroom is largely constituted by one's position there (Maher, 1993, p. 118).

There is a certain accountability in highlighting and making public one's own positionality, which may be a good initial response to what Bonilla-Silva and Forman name as "a new racetalk" which "avoids direct racial discourse but effectively safeguards racial privilege" (2000, p. 52). Someone who holds racist views is unlikely to self-identify as a racist. Their arguments are important in discussing teacher candidates because they identify some of the more subtle forms of resistance often encountered when trying to examine underlying prejudices. They effectively reveal in their study how individuals unconsciously deploy an array of strategies to claim they are non-racist, while simultaneously affirming racist views in the course of their dialogue: "We highlighted how students used the argumentative strategies of Apparent Sympathy, Fairness, Reversal, Justification: Force of Facts, to justify the racial status quo. By invoking abstract elements of liberalism, making pragmatic claims (e.g. these are the

facts), and transforming the notion of equality into ‘meritocracy’” (Bonilla-Silva, 2000, p. 52) the respondents in their study could hide behind ambivalence and neo-liberal values to defend their views. While their research represents findings particular to race relations in the United States, their insights also pertain to the Canadian context. Their discourse analysis concludes that forms of sublimation are common. As critical educators, we have to be aware that some teacher candidates will use the neo-liberal rhetoric of capitalism to persuade themselves and others that democracy is fully functioning and prejudices of all kinds are only the exception. Their arguments may sound initially reasonable because they are grounded in the dominant culture’s perspective.

It is only when these arguments are put in a larger, more globalized context that addresses inequities that the ideological framework becomes suspect. Giroux expresses the concern of viewing racism on an individual rather than systemic level when he writes,

Racism is an ideological poison that is learned; it is a historical and social construction that seeps into social practices, needs, the unconscious, and rationality itself. If it is to be challenged at the institutional level, at the very centres of authority, racism must first be addressed as an ideological concern for the ways in which it is produced, sustained, and taken-up within a cultural politics secured within wider dominant relations of power (2005, p. 85).

Giroux’s metaphor of comparing racism to “an ideological poison” is poignant because he captures the toxic effects of racism; its roots, like poison that infiltrates the

body, are often invisible and difficult to pinpoint, but its effects are undeniable and damaging.

One of the hard aspects of teaching students to engage in any kind of critical reflection is that it often entails the painful process of "unlearning" accepted "truths" about how society is structured. As Quist-Adade succinctly observes, "While all people harbour prejudices about other human groups and stereotype out-groups, not all people are in a position to discriminate on a systematic basis" (2007, p. 4). The process of engaging those students who most benefit from the current hegemony in dialogue about privilege, and how they are embedded in its structure and the degree of agency they have to make change, is a slow and tenuous road for any professor of adult learners.

## **8. Conclusions**

I focus on teacher candidates because pre-service programs across North America are struggling to find ways to actively engage them in contentious issues such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. Beverly Cross warns that field experience in a diverse school setting may offer only a superficial understanding of race issues. She states "exposure is simply insufficient and, in fact, may produce contradictory learning from that intended by the university faculty" (Cross, p. 208, 2003). In Canada, most teacher education programs are based on a traditional model that does not put issues such as race at the forefront. While there are individual courses offered in many pre-service programs that raise social justice issues, these courses are often optional. And thus, perhaps some of the teacher candidates who would most benefit from such courses, tend not to sign up for them. I wish to propose literature is valuable as a tool to combat discrimination and encourage authentic dialogues. I argue that the teaching of literature

be extended beyond English methodology courses in pre-service programs to fit into course offerings that address social issues. Courses that try to teach teacher candidates about contentious issues often employ strategies such as showing Jane Elliott's (1985) *Blue Eyed/Brown Eyed* workshop documentary or articles such as Peggy McIntosh's (1990) "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." These are very useful means as a way to develop greater understanding in teacher candidates about complex issues that make the classroom a political, contested space. However, the directness of these non-fiction pieces may also serve to shut down certain teacher candidates unwilling or unable yet to introspectively consider their own position, their privilege or lack of privilege, or their role as they move from being the student to the teacher. If literature were used much in the same way that trade books are often introduced into various disciplines to garner student interest, the literary focus would give some teacher candidates the needed distance and detachment to discuss issues personal to them but not personally about them.

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