

Thematic Analysis

Introduction

Many scholars believe that there is an inequity in our current society, including education, caused by structural beliefs regarding social identities (Ferber, 2012; Harro, 2010; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Young, 2010). One theory is that multicultural Education is the solution to inequity in schools and is defined as being “a progressive approach for transforming education that holistically critiques and responds to discriminatory policies and practices in education (Gorski, 2010). The multicultural education themes of privilege and power in relation to social identities are prevalent in the film *12 Years a Slave*, and directly relate to issues observed in the current educational system.

Privilege

It was theorized by scholars that each individual is born with specific “*social identities*” (Harro, 2010, p. 45) and each one is either dominant or subordinate (Ferber, 2012; Harro, 2010; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Dominant groups, including White people, males, and middle-aged persons, among others, “are considered the ‘norm’ around which assumptions are built, and...have relatively more social power” (Harro, 2010, p. 47). Subordinate groups, including females, youth, and racial minorities, among others, are “disenfranchised, exploited, and victimized by prejudice, discrimination, and other structural obstacles” (Harro, 2010, p. 47). Whites are provided privilege, which is “the rights, advantages, and protections enjoyed by some *at the expense of...others*” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 58), Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo defined Whiteness to be “the specific dimensions of racism that elevate White people over people of color” (2012, p. 119).

Whiteness (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012) is depicted in *12 Years a Slave* in the way that people of color were expected to work for, and be owned by, White people (Pitt & McQueen, 2013). Similar to the way that the United States government believed they could claim the Lakota land in the West simply based on superiority (RedCryFilm, 2013), White slave owners believed that they could own people of color based on their inferiority (Pitt & McQueen, 2013). Additionally, if a slave went missing it was acceptable to retrieve them or claim a different person of color to be their lost slave simply because the slave owners needed workers (Pitt & McQueen, 2013).

One major example of White privilege in the movie occurred when a White man was sent to work for the slave owner and shared his story of once being an overseer, revealing that he had hopes of returning to that sector of society one day (Pitt & McQueen, 2013). A person of color in that time period had no hopes of ever rising up in the Southern plantation ranks simply because they were not White (Pitt & McQueen, 2013). Therefore, even though he and Solomon were in the same position at that time, the White man had hopes of improving his status while Solomon did not (Pitt & McQueen, 2013).

Along with this, slaves could not be educated in the culture of White people, including reading and writing, or they could be killed for being more than was acceptable (Pitt & McQueen, 2013). Since it was a privilege to be cultured and learned, when slave owners shared their music, food, and dance with their slaves, they expected gratitude for being so kind and noble (Pitt & McQueen, 2013). This is a direct example of cultural imperialism, which is the “universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm” (Young, 2010, p. 41). The slave owners simply believed that they had the luxury to be

learned based on their racial identity and that everyone should accept the White culture as the best (Pitt & McQueen, 2013).

Since everyone is born into dominant and subordinate social identities, it is important to step back and evaluate how they shape the kind of person one becomes and how it affects relationships (Gorski, 2010). Currently in the educational system, curriculums tend to teach history from the White perspective and emphasize cultural beliefs of the dominant groups of society (Ferber, 2012; Gorski, 2010). Just as the structure of the plantation system of the south needed to change to recognize the importance and equality of all human life, the current educational system needs to change to provide equitable learning environments for all students.

Power

The dominant group of any social identity has significantly more power over any subordinate group, and with power comes oppression and inequity (Harro, 2010; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Young, 2010). Power is defined by Sensoy and DiAngelo as being “the ideological, technical, and discursive elements by which those in authority impose their ideas and interests on everyone...[and] is dependent on what position a group holds and their ability to affect other groups from that position” (2012, p. 52-120). Power is depicted in *12 Years a Slave* through the mistreatment of slaves by owners and the treatment of White men by the legal system (Pitt & McQueen, 2013).

Solomon had no way of proving that he was not Platt when he was kidnapped and questioned (Pitt & McQueen, 2013). Due to his lack of identity papers, the White men exerted power and beat him until he admitted to being Platt (Pitt & McQueen, 2013). This difference in power between racial identities led to a society where Solomon was guilty until proven innocent and taken advantage of based only on the color of his skin (Pitt & McQueen, 2013).

Similar to how race played a key role in the creation of multicultural education (Gorski, 1999), race ruled the legal system in Solomon’s time (Pitt & McQueen, 2013). At the end of the movie, it is stated that Solomon brought those responsible for his kidnapping to trial, but since Black people were not allowed to testify against White people, the men escaped prosecution (Pitt & McQueen, 2013). With the creation of multicultural education, it took groups of individuals in power to make a change rather than the individuals who were directly affected by the inequity (Gorski, 1999) probably because “People who try to contradict the ‘norm’ pay a price for their independent thinking, and...if they are members of target groups, they are held up as examples of why this group is inferior to the agent group” (Harro, 2010, p. 49). However, when members of the dominant group hold positions of power, change can come about (Gorski, 1999). It is in this way that individuals with power are able to shape and change society, while those who do not hold positions of power are forced to stand back and wait for change to occur (Ferber, 2012; Harro, 2010).

Conclusion

Solomon’s journey to freedom shows how privilege and power are used in society to promote or prevent groups from being active and having control over their lives (Pitt & McQueen, 2013). Solomon’s lack of privilege based on his racial identity prevented him from having the right to be a free man (Ferber, 2012; Pitt & McQueen, 2013; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). His lack of power prevented him from being believed by White men and making a difference in the kidnapping of free Black men (Pitt & McQueen, 2013). Multicultural education strives to bring equity to students of all social identities to prevent individuals from being held

back or failed due to lack of privilege or power (Gorski, 2010). It is important to understand all social identities that individuals hold and how this shapes and controls society in order to bring about reform, not only in schools, but in all areas of society.

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