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Exploring social justice with third graders through the works of Mildred D. Taylor

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Exploring social justice with third graders through the works of Mildred D. Taylor

Abstract

We need to learn the history of the civilizations that have given us the framework for all of what we teach and learn. We must learn more specifically about the Americas and the European oppression, slavery, the Civil War in the United States, and the American Dream with liberty and justice for all. Still, perhaps the most significant learning, our change of heart, happens just one person at a time. It happens by developing those relationships of mutual care and concern.

For us, the voices came from [author] Mildred D. Taylor and from Nina [a student]. For social justice to be served for every life, we must seek to understand and to give a voice to victims of prejudice, injustice, and oppression--particularly those among us--for they will be the source of our enlightenment.

EXPLORING SOCIAL JUSTICE WITH THIRD GRADERS
THROUGH THE WORKS OF MILDRED D. TAYLOR

A Graduate Paper: Journal Article

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Elaine M. Johnson

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Sept. 30, 1999
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EXPLORING SOCIAL JUSTICE
THROUGH THE WORKS OF MILDRED D. TAYLOR

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10:30. Morning recess. My third grade class joyously grabbed sweatshirts and jackets as they jostled through the door, heading outside to revel in Iowa's emerging March warmth. This was break time for Nina Aimes*, the associate assigned to Hope, a special needs student in our classroom who spent most of her waking hours in a motorized wheelchair. Hope was "one of the kids." She didn't require Nina's help during recess--her classmates accepted, included, and cared for her as one of their own. I smiled as I watched them from my classroom door, thinking how far we had come this year in the process of inclusion (mainstreaming a special needs student into the regular classroom).

An audible sigh next to me drew me back from the happy scene. I turned and saw that it was Nina with a pained expression on her face. I could tell that she had been crying. Before I could form the question she explained, "Hope and I have just had quite a confrontation. I don't know where she's picked it up, but she has some powerful racial prejudices." Nina was African American--the only African American staff member in our school of which the student population is about 5% non-white. She and Hope had been out of the classroom for an hour or so right before recess, normal for our mornings. Hope's cerebral palsy necessitated frequent position changes and complicated two-person transfers for toileting and on-site physical therapy. During the fifteen-minute recess I was able to piece together the story--that Hope had made a scathing remark to Nina--to the effect that Nina could never be allowed to go to a "regular" church because she was black. Nina had responded without judgment but wanted to understand why Hope had felt as she did. Hope had no trouble putting into words just how she felt about the African American race. This was not the smiling, courageous Hope we had come to know.

Nina was visibly offended. I felt a crushing sense of failure. Our elementary school, one of six in our college community of 30,000, was touted as a school of inclusion. We had a long history of including mildly-to-severely handicapped students within our regular classroom settings. Wheelchairs, Delta-Talkers, adaptive equipment, and the special needs students' personal associates are as common as overhead projectors. We spend countless hours creating communities of inclusion within each classroom. Hope had been new to our school early in the year, so she had been the beneficiary of our efforts too. How, we wondered-- when we had worked so hard to include her--dare she exclude the very person who dedicated most of her day to her?

Our question was compounded with the fact that we had addressed racial diversity earlier in the year with the Newbery Prize winning African American author Mildred D. Taylor. I had shared Taylor's book, Song of the Trees¹, with the class during Black History Month. The book is set in the South and involves white men forcibly harvesting trees from a black family's property. Nina had become involved in the reading of Taylor's book, too, since I had developed laryngitis just after starting it. The students had been enthralled with her reading; she had a beautiful, low voice, and she fell easily into the rhythm of the words. She had stopped a few times to explain that she had relatives in Alabama who had been through a similar experience of having "white folk" wanting to take over their land for the trees that grew there. The racial prejudices they had encountered in the South had affected both Mildred D. Taylor and Nina for life.

Our Black History unit came to a close, and the students moved on to other topics. Nina and I, however, had a new way of seeing each other--more open, more willing to listen. She began to share with me what it was like to be African American. I

felt like the student while she became the teacher. But now, this--what was the problem? From all appearances, this was not just about ethnicity or being physically handicapped, but about the larger issue of social justice.

Understanding the Problem

Exploring past and recent writings on social justice and racism in conjunction with the works of Mildred D. Taylor helped me to begin to understand our problem. It is painfully visible to those who dare to look that the U.S. continues to live in the shadow of its oppression of African Americans. As much as we would like to think that we are a "color-blind" and fully democratic society, we are still being choked by the weeds of fallen seeds of prejudice and segregation from our past.

Historians and anthropologists have been able to trace the emergence and institutionalization of domination, exploitation, and injustice to the time of emerging agricultural societies. As civilizations learned specialization and agricultural expertise, nomadic groups would seize the ripening harvest and enslave the society which produced it. Douglas Sturm refers to Tzvetan Todorov's study of *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*,² noting that we descendants of Europeans who are Americans of North, South and Central Americas must confront our long history of injustice from Christopher Columbus to Hernando Cortes to Bartolome' de Las Casas. The basic precepts of colonialism involve the conquests and oppression of indigenous peoples.

Much has been written about the years of the Middle Passage, slave trade, and slavery in the Americas. It is not always taught that slavery in the United States was a "closed" process, as opposed to the more open processes in Latin American Countries. In Latin American Countries the African slave's status was more like that of an

indentured servant, and many slaves were able to purchase their freedom. Slaves in the United States faced a considerably more oppressive situation. Following the Civil War and Emancipation there were further complications with the development of theories in the social sciences. Following the 1895 Plessy vs. Ferguson decision that sanctioned the concept of "separate but equal," the Anglo-Saxon complex was taking shape. One of the first famous American Black authors, W.E.B. DuBois, wrote at the turn of the twentieth century:

[This complex] developed as a reflection of the inevitable racial implications in Social Darwinism which was the overwhelmingly dominant ideology in America at the time. In an age when men thought of themselves as having evolved from the ape rather than having been created in the image of angels, the Negro, it was almost universally agreed among even the most educated people, was definitely an inferior breed and situated at the very base of the evolutionary tree.³

Even Theodore Roosevelt wrote that he agreed with this thinking, and that he vowed never to repeat his "mistake" of asking Booker T. Washington or any other Negro to the White House.⁴

One of the great black writers of this century, John Hope Franklin, said that W.E.B. DuBois' prophesy that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line did not fully anticipate the ramifications of the color line.

It would take the wisdom of the ages to see the profound impact that several centuries of preoccupation with undervaluing an entire race of people could have

on the moral fiber of a nation, and on the national psyche.⁵

As educators, we and our students must face our heritage which includes gross violations of social justice. In our classroom, we had attempted to do that during our Black History month. What we had not done was to understand the current status of race relations in the United States or even in our own community; nor had we made any attempt to make it personally relevant.

In James Baldwin's book, The Fire Next Time, Baldwin's advice to his young nephew is that he, as a black, must accept people (of other color) with love, because these "people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it."⁶

Kenneth B. Clark, after growing up in Harlem and then returning with his doctorate degree to try to help New York City officials find a way to improve ghetto life, writes, "The poetic irony of American race relations is that the rejected Negro must somehow also find the strength to free the privileged white."⁷

Despite the grim truth of our nation's history, we should realize that not all societies developed systems of oppression, among which were the ancestors of present-day African Americans.⁸ Certainly, we must understand that humans are able to, and must individually and collectively choose patterns of life since few specific patterns, except for certain reflexes, are imprinted in their genetic makeup.⁹ Especially now, as we face a new millennium, as we reflect on the annihilations in Kosovo, Bosnia and Rwanda, and as we study the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, we

should realize that all of us who teach in any capacity should examine our lifetimes', generations', and societies' histories. We should recognize that we all hold a moldable piece of the puzzle to help create a new generation that works to minimize or perhaps even to eradicate social injustices wherever they exist.

As the focus narrowed back to the classroom, it became apparent that two conditions probably existed which affected our classroom environment:

1. The socioeconomic status of our district was largely middle-to-upper income white. Research has shown that this group has generally had little first-hand experience with hardship or prejudice, and is scarcely aware of its existence.¹⁰
2. Only an African American can truly understand the "black experience," and with this wisdom has the unique ability to enlighten those who are lacking experience.¹¹

Affecting a Change of Heart

After consulting my principal, I worked with the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education at the University of Northern Iowa to design an action research project for our classroom. Assuming that our prior experience with Mildred D. Taylor's Song of the Trees had been interesting to students but not an instrument for true learning, as defined by a change of heart or behavior, we would try having Nina read two more books by Taylor, and, in the process, engage them in discussions as she shared her own experiences. Four students were randomly selected from the class for pre- and post-interviews. (See Fig. 1 for the lists of interview questions). In essence, we would be exploring social justice through Taylor's books, and

then trying to determine whether the process would affect a change in the relationships within the classroom.

One of the world's leading scholars and researchers in multicultural education, James A. Banks, identifies several common approaches to multicultural education. Understanding these approaches clarifies what was happening in our classroom. The first is the "contributions approach" in which content about ethnic and cultural groups are limited primarily to holidays and celebrations such as our "Black History" focus. Next, the "additive approach" entails the addition of a book or unit without changing the framework of the curriculum. Using the additive approach, we had read of Mildred D. Taylor's Song of the Trees. The problem with these first two approaches is that they are both consistent with the basic structure of the dominant culture. Those who challenge the dominant institutions are less likely to be selected. A more effective approach which Banks calls the "transformation approach" changes the canons, paradigms, and basic assumptions of the curriculum and enables students to "view concepts, issues, themes and problems from different perspectives and points of view."¹²

Transformation is a decision-making and social action approach in which students are given the opportunity to read and hear the voices of those who were victorious, as well as those who were downtrodden. Banks says, "You can't impose inclusion. It has to be participatory. People on the margins of society have to participate in shaping the vision of the commonwealth if they are really to feel included..."¹³ The intent of our project was to confront the class with Taylor's experiences of prejudice, and then to allow them to freely interact with Nina who could understand and explain the "Black experience" better than I. In Banks' words,

“Multicultural content is inherently emotive, personal, conflictual, and involving. Consequently, it is essential that students be given ample opportunities to express their feelings and emotions, to interact with their peers and classmates, and to express rage or pride when multicultural issues are discussed.”¹⁴

The Gold Cadillac

The first of Taylor’s books, The Gold Cadillac¹⁵, was about an African American family who lived in Toledo, Ohio, shortly before World War II. The father had purchased a new gold-colored Cadillac, and decided to drive to Mississippi to visit relatives. Aunts and uncles accompanied the family, caravan style, so they could watch out for each other. They prepared food ahead and packed it for the trip, since there would be few public restaurants along the way that would accommodate them. Nina explained that white people don’t like to see black people accomplishing anything, as in the ability of the family to afford a Cadillac. She said, “It was that way before the Civil War, and it’s still that way. We’ve gotta teach other people that it’s okay.”¹⁶

In Taylor’s book, the family in the gold Cadillac is stopped by policemen who addressed the father as “boy,” and falsely accused and arrested him for speeding. Nina explained the term “boy” was used in a derogatory way, a way used to keep black people down. She also said that a policeman recently had stopped her in her home town, asking her if she owned the car that she was driving, a car which was new, red, and sporty. She explained that sometimes white people get the wrong impression about black people driving fancy cars. “Sometimes, they’re wrong,” she said. “And sometimes black people are wrong.”¹⁷ Nina inherently understood, and was trying to help us understand, that

within our American culture there exists highly refined subcultures complete with values, customs, and languages. Having such differences without a means of bridging the gaps through direct contact and communication with each other can easily cause misperceptions.

After the incident with the police, the family in Taylor's book decided to leave the gold Cadillac in Memphis with a relative, and drove the relative's older Chevy to Mississippi. Once in Mississippi, the father explained it all to his daughter, that it had to do with black people who had once been forced to be slaves, that it had to do with the color of their skin, and the stupidity, ignorance, and laws of the white people. When they returned to Toledo, the father sold the new Cadillac.

The Friendship

Our second book, The Friendship¹⁸, opened another matter for discussion, since Taylor used the word "nigger." This book is set in the South in the 1930s. It concerns the relationship of a black man, Tom Bee, who, out of compassion, became a care giver for a homeless, orphaned, and ill white boy, John Wallace. As John, in Tom Bee's care, grew older and stronger, he told Tom that he loved him like a father, and he added emphasis to this proclamation by promising that he would always want Tom to call him by his first name.

The unwritten laws of the South demanded that a black person must address a white person of any age by Miss, Mrs., or Mr., so by giving Tom this permission, John was demonstrating the highest form of respect. The problem appeared when John Wallace grew to adulthood and became the owner of the local store. It was incomprehensible to other white folk that Wallace would allow a black man to call him

anything but “Mr.” In a show of solidarity in order to save his reputation, Wallace denounced Tom Bee to his face and added the racial epithet, “nigger.”

Although it appeared only once, the students were very aware of it and were shocked by it. Nina finished reading the book right before lunch time, and the “n” word was the topic of students’ lunch and recess conversations. When students returned from recess, it became apparent that we would need to deal with “it.” Our discussion lasted an hour and a half, defying all the research about attention spans for third graders! Throughout the discussion, one could have heard a pin drop. Nina addressed students’ many questions about “colored,” “black,” “nigger,” and “boy.” She explained that within the black community they still say “little colored girl” or “little black girl.” She said that she understood that what people say now is “African American.” She said that she accepts it all, although she acknowledged that some people don’t.

Nina did not dodge the questions about “nigger.” She admitted that she, too, was surprised to find it in the book, but she was glad in a way because, she said, “I thought that maybe this will open things up, you know, I can hear something. But I think what it did was it scared people.”¹⁹ Students related that they thought it was a bad word, but were confused because they had heard it in rap music. Nina explained that in the black community “nigger” is sometimes used in place of a word like “brother.” But for a white person to call a black person that, it’s taken as an offense. She pointed out to the students that the students’ community was not as comfortable with differences in race or ethnic background as students in her own neighboring community.

She also carefully pointed out that it is not just the word itself, but the way in which the word is said that is significant. They discussed differences in communities, too.

In the end, Nina and the students understood that there was still fear and distrust between the white communities and black communities, but that the fear and distrust was largely a fear of the unknown. A general consensus was developing that something very important was occurring in the classroom that afternoon.

2:30. Afternoon recess. The students, having brought closure to an emotional topic, rushed to Nina and hugged her. They hugged each other too. There was a new respect in Hope's eyes--Nina had taught with the wisdom and authority of one with experience. Hope and Nina had been privately working through their relationship since that first day when Hope's prejudice had become so apparent. Nina had already explained many things to Hope from the "black perspective," and their working relationship had steadily improved. Still, Hope's participation and support of Nina throughout our classroom discussion was an encouraging sign.

The one African American student in the class had shared his experiences too. His mother stopped by after school later that week and expressed her appreciation that we had created a venue through which he could begin exploring his "color" as well as his relationships with other students. He had been working through it intensely, and had been sharing his thoughts and concerns with his parents throughout our readings and discussions.

The Interviews

Results were obtained by interview rather than using a questionnaire for two reasons. Most importantly, the interview was chosen in order to get the richness and variety of response from the students. A questionnaire may not have been as effective given the limited reading skills of third graders and the fact that the sampling was very small.

Before we began, I had randomly selected four students, two boys and two girls, whom I would interview both before and after the readings and discussions. Written permission was obtained from parents of all the students in the class since the readings and discussions were recorded. Nina also gave written permission to use her comments. The interviews were conducted and recorded during recesses and were kept brief (about 5 minutes) so the interviewees could still have a few minutes to go outdoors with their friends.

When the students were interviewed before the readings, they had a limited sense of current racial oppression in our community. They knew about the Civil War and the fact that African Americans had originally been brought from Africa to be slaves in America, but were unaware that prejudice and oppression was still experienced by African Americans.

Ben

One student, Ben, whose second-best friend was African American, admitted to being surprised and troubled that his friend was so sensitive about his skin color. As their friendship had grown, his friend gradually had come to understand that Ben's questions about color were simply a matter of trying to understand, and were not intended to be derogatory.

Mrs. J.: Who do you think has a harder life?

Ben: I think it's a little bit harder for black people because they get upset a lot when people make fun of them, and I would too. And if he's really tough, and if your parents were there, and he couldn't hurt you or anything, and you could make fun of him, and if you really make him sad, it wouldn't be nice. There

wouldn't be anything that he could do about it, and he would just keep getting madder.

Mrs. J.: Do you know of anything that would make the situation better?

Ben: Probably a lot, but I just don't know what.

I was beginning to believe that students basically cared about each other, but a lack of understanding and knowledge about cultural differences within our own communities prevented students from being aware of others' sensitivities about their differences. There was, however, an interest and curiosity about differences, as seen in Kit's responses.²⁰

Kit

Mrs. J.: If we were to read a book as a read-aloud that was set in the South about 50 years ago, which of the adults in our classroom would you like to read it?

Kit: Maybe if it was about slavery, maybe Mrs. Aimes, because she has a little bit of history. You know, she has that kind of voice that goes with it really good. She would add a little excitement because if you've lived in the South, and you know the history, you'd just like it.

Mrs. J.: How did you feel about Mrs. Aimes reading Mildred Taylor's book to you earlier in the year?

Kit: I didn't expect that she would talk so much about slavery because some of them are kind of shy or don't want to talk about it, but she's really proud that she's African American. When she came in the first week, I thought that she might be kinda mean, but it turned out that she's really, really nice!

Mrs. J.: If you had just learned that your teacher for next year was going to be from another country, how would you feel?

Kit: I wouldn't care, I mean, they're just human.²¹

Lisa

Lisa had college-age sisters and thought and acted more maturely than most of her classmates. Still, her responses didn't reflect knowledge of present day community problems.

Mrs. J.: Were you surprised that white and black people had bad feelings toward each other?

Lisa: I can't believe that. I just don't like that.

Mrs. J.: Do you think that the Civil War put an end to slavery and all of the problems that went with it?

Lisa: Not all of them, but pretty much of them.

Mrs. J.: How did you get your information?

Lisa: We did some research in here [third grade], and in second grade and first grade, and we read some books. I did a report about Abraham Lincoln and how he worked with a black man and made things better. And now hardly any black people are getting treated badly.²²

Andy

This was Andy's first year in the community, having moved from an affluent suburb in Minnesota. It was apparent that Andy talked frequently at home about current events and social issues.

Mrs. J.: If you had just learned that your teacher for next year was going to be

from another country, how would you feel?

Andy: It wouldn't really make any difference because teachers are usually really nice, unless you get really loud, and then they get kinda hard on you. [grins]

Mrs. J: If you learned that you would be getting a new student in the class that was from another country, how would you feel?

Andy: Good. Because they could teach you a new language or something. You could help them, and it would be kind of fun, and you could teach them to say things.

At this point, I noticed that Andy's focus on learning differences was on language, but not other cultural aspects.

Mrs. J: Do you think that the civil war put an end to slavery and all of the problems that went with it?

Andy: I think so.

Mrs. J: Do you think that we still have problems now?

Andy: I don't think so. I don't know. I only heard about it in Bosnia, that people are destroying their land, and people are dying every day.²³

Post Interviews

During the post-discussion interviews, students were much more eager and willing to share with me than they were during the pre-discussion interviews.

Kit

Mrs. J.: Do you feel any differently now that we have had some discussions?

Kit: Well, it was a little bit easier to understand, and it was more fun when Mrs. Aimes read the book to us, the way she reads and stuff. And then when we talked about it more, and just kept talking about it, it was easier to learn about it. And when she talked about the word “Negro” and “nigger” people would be like shocked, and the people kept saying those words up in the lunchroom, but after a little while it didn’t seem so bad.

Mrs. J.: Do you feel more comfortable or less comfortable about starting a conversation with somebody about the differences in people?

Kit: It’s easier! Because you’ve done it so much that you know how to discuss it. You’re not as shy about it.

Mrs. J.: Would there be a difference now if you were getting a new teacher or new student? [implying a racial difference]

Kit: Now you know more about it, and if they’re troubled or something, you know more how to react because you know more why they’re feeling that way, because you know more about their ancestors and why people are making bad comments about them.

Mrs. J.: Who do you think has an easier life?

Kit: Probably white people, because if you’re black, people might say bad things about you, and people don’t try to get to know you. And if you’re trying to get a job, it’s harder to get the job. And more white people live in humongous mansions.

Mrs. J.: Is there anything else that you’d like to share?

Kit: It was fun, and it was easier to understand when we talked about it more, and I think that we should have more of these discussions next year. You learn more

things about it, and you can talk about the things you're afraid to talk about. You don't have to worry about saying something special. You can just talk, without worrying.²⁴

Lisa

Mrs. J.: Lisa, do you feel any differently now that we have had some discussions?

Lisa: I think that it kind of changed some of my feelings, like I didn't know that some things changed the meanings of words, like the tones of voices and stuff. I didn't really know that.

Mrs. J.: Do you think that we should have other discussions like this in school?

Lisa: Yeah! I think that this was a really good thing to do because some people didn't even know that "Negro" wasn't a bad thing to say, only if it's in a bad tone. I think that it was good, and we learned some new things.²⁵

Andy

Mrs. J.: Do you feel any differently now?

Andy: Kind of, because you can just get all the [stress] out, because sometimes you just don't want to talk about it, and sometimes you do. Sometimes you can get it out by saying I'm sorry, or something, or just by having a conversation.²⁶

Ben

Mrs. J.: Do you feel any differently now that we have had some discussions?

Ben: I think that I would try a little harder to understand what they [African Americans] are going through.

Mrs. J.: Do you think that we should have other discussions like this in school?

Ben: Well, sort of, because if we don't get to talk about it, then we'll go through our whole life thinking that it [nigger] is a bad word, and it's not really, it's just that you have to be careful how and where it's used.

Mrs. J.: Will you share any of this with your African American friend?

Ben: Well, he loves rap, and I hear that word (nigger) but I don't think that I've ever said anything to him about it, but now I can tell him about our discussion with Mrs. Aimes.²⁷

Conclusion

Implicit in the student's responses is a "reality that the United States is a caste society in which race is the major determinative of inequality and therefore must be taken into account in any attempt to level the playing fields of life."²⁷ Perhaps of greatest significance for teaching is that, although students knew about slavery and emancipation in the U.S., the real progress and impact was made through an intermingling of Mildred D. Taylor's stories with Nina's personal stories as she, with compassion, enlightened us about oppression that still exists. "Those teaching for social justice today, even when concerned for principled pursuit of a fairer social world, cannot but pay heed to the importance of embodied relationships, mutuality, care, and concern."²⁹

What had begun as a small research project actually resulted in a substantial paradigm shift in my philosophy of teaching. I began to understand what James A. Banks meant when he asserted that multicultural education should be conducted so that all individuals, European descendants, Asian descendants, and all people of color, would first learn their unique place within their own cultural community. Secondly, they would learn how to effectively interrelate between cultures. The ultimate goal is that they

would have the skills to be active leaders and participants in the global multiculturalism of the twenty-first century.³⁰

The italicized sections that follow recount my perceptions of the classroom as we began the project and then interpret the method by which we attempted to affect an attitude change of participants in the classroom.

Conditions of learning:

In the beginning I had made some assumptions about the learning conditions in our classroom. My assumptions were validated and upheld by my classroom research project and by recent literature:

- Students in our community, being a middle- to upper-class and primarily Caucasian population, were largely oblivious to feelings produced by prejudice and injustice, having not experienced those feelings themselves; therefore, the students were not able to easily recognize or identify with the feelings experienced by Mildred Taylor and Nina when they encountered acts of prejudice.
- African Americans do have a very real sense of racial prejudice in our community, even when non-African Americans in their midst are unaware of prejudice existing.

Affecting a change:

In order to give students a deeper understanding than just “head knowledge” about racial prejudice and oppression, we tried to become involved in a personal way. In this project we:

- facilitated an experience by which students were able to develop a relationship with an African American who was able to communicate with care, concern, and

respect.

- were open to listening to, and encouraged the sharing of Nina's experiences by suspending our judgment and establishing trust.
- accepted Nina's words as being the wisdom from her own experience and representative of the "black experience."

Our classroom experience took us deeper within ourselves to examine one of our most basic needs--that of belonging and being unconditionally accepted. We were learning that the meaning of social justice is rooted right at the heart of our beings, within our core values, within the essence of our relationships with each other, and within the dignity that we must honor in ourselves and others. How do we serve those needs? Certainly, we need to learn the history of the civilizations that have given us the framework for all of what we teach and learn. We must learn more specifically about the Americas and the European oppression, slavery, the Civil War in the United States, and the American Dream with liberty and justice for all. Still, perhaps the most significant learning, our change of heart, happens just one person at a time. It happens by developing those relationships of mutual care and concern.

As a classroom teacher, I may not personally be able to speak with authority from my own experience; therefore, it becomes my responsibility to find one who can. For us, the voices came from Mildred D. Taylor and from Nina. For social justice to be served for every life, we must seek to understand and to give a voice to victims of prejudice, injustice, and oppression--particularly those among us--for they will be the source of our enlightenment. Through them we may hope to lighten the burden of our world's injustices.

***All names are pseudonyms.**

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About the Author

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Figure 1

Pre-Discussion Questions

1. If we were to read a book as a read-aloud that was set in the South about 50 years ago, which of the adults in our classroom would you like to read it?
2. When we're doing group work and you need an adult to help you, who would you like to help you?
3. If you had just learned that your teacher for next year was going to be from another country, how would you feel?
4. If you learned that you would be getting a new student in the class that was from another country, how would you feel?
5. How did you feel about Mrs. Aimes (Nina) reading Mildred Taylor's book to you earlier in the year?
6. Was there anything surprising in the book?
7. Were you surprised that white and black people had bad feelings toward each other?
8. What do you think that the Civil War has done for the way black people and white people treat each other?
9. Do you think that the civil war put an end to slavery and all of the problems that went with it?
10. How did you get your information?
11. Do you think that there is any difference between the way things are in Waterloo (Mrs. Aimes's community) and Cedar Falls (your community)?

Post-Discussion Questions

1. Do you feel any differently now that we have had some discussions?
2. Do you feel more comfortable or less comfortable about starting a conversation with somebody about the differences in people?
3. Do you think that both black and white people need a chance to talk about differences?
4. Would there be a difference now in your answer about a new teacher or a new student?
5. Who do you think has an easier life?
6. Do you think that you might ever go out of your way to get to know an African-American?
7. Did it surprise you that black people are angry about some things?
8. Do you think that we should have other discussions like this in school?
9. Is there anything else that you'd like to share?