

Critical Consciousness Case Study*



Mr. Robinson is a young White teacher who recently moved to a city in the deep south to work as a staff member of a new Montessori middle school. Having felt restrained by what he could teach and how he could teach it in his previous jobs, Mr. Robinson jumped at the opportunity to work at a school that was handing the decision-making reins to its teachers. As the founding middle school teacher, Mr. Robinson was excited to create a curriculum that centered on issues of social justice.

The new middle school program at Hamilton Montessori began serving 27 students in the fall of 2015. The school population was predominantly comprised of Black and Brown students. As a consequence of systematically racialized segregated housing within the city, this also meant that more than 90% of Hamilton's students were Students of Color, and 100% of the student body received free or reduced lunch. Within this context, Mr. Robinson set out to design a syllabus that deliberately consisted of reading work by Authors of Color, as opposed to the majority White authors he had previously used. Mr. Robinson constructed units around the themes of inequality, justice, and colonialism with seminal writings by authors of color acting as the cornerstones.

The first book Mr. Robinson placed on the syllabus was *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Though Mr. Robinson's principal was highly supportive of most of his decisions, Principal Fowler pulled Mr. Robinson aside in a meeting before the school year began to discuss the book. Ms. Fowler had read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and though she viewed it as a deeply important book, she also worried about the book's persistent use of racial slurs. For instance, the Native American protagonist is harshly bullied by White students and acts of racial violence and race-based stress happen throughout the novel. With this in mind, she instructed Mr. Robinson to write a letter to parents and distribute it with the books. Mr. Robinson complied, and once the unit began, he was awestruck at just how drawn students were to the book. Mr. Robinson loved that he could help scaffold the very complex topics of inequality and white supremacy with such young but capable students. What's more, students were hooked on his class.

*These cases studies are based on real scenarios; identifying details have been changed.



However, near the end of the first week, Mr. Robinson received an angry email from a parent. Noah, one of the only White students in the school, had promptly given his mother Mr. Robinson's letter regarding the rationale for teaching *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and she then proceeded to inspect the book herself. She was livid about the book choice, and requested a meeting with Mr. Robinson and Principal Fowler. In the meeting she was in tears about how such a "negative" and "non-traditional" book could be given to young students, and was worried about how her son would be affected by having discussions about racism and white supremacy while he was one of the only White students in his class. Though she gained more respect for the decision as Mr. Robinson and Ms. Fowler explained the justification for the book, before she left she regrettably claimed that, "if you proceed to teach content like this, I am sorry, but I am going to have to withdraw Noah and send him to Glennwood."

Later that night as Mr. Robinson racked his brain about losing one of his students so soon to a school that was one of the lowest performing in the entire state, he received another phone call from a parent. It was the mother of Chaunece, a Black student who earlier that day had told Mr. Robinson that *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* was, "the first book I actually ever enjoyed." Her mother, however, exclaimed over the phone: "Listen, Mr. Robinson, I appreciate what you are trying to do, but I looked at this book and I think it will make my daughter feel unsafe with all this talk about racial violence. She is young and doesn't need to be worried about any that yet. I'm not going to allow her to read it. Period."

After learning about this conversation as well, Principal Fowler requested a meeting to discuss how Mr. Robinson should proceed and design future units.

- **Why might each of the parents be feeling that way?**
- **What is the best way forward in addressing the parents of Noah and Chaunece?**
- **What should Mr. Robinson say to the principal?**
- **What proactive steps could have been done by Mr. Robinson or the school to support Critical Consciousness?**
- **Have you ever been placed in a similar situation involving a curriculum choice that involved racism? If so, how did you or your administrator react? How did you not react?**

Case Discussion (30 minutes)



As a group, discuss your reactions, reflections, and responses to the case. Here are the case discussion questions again for reference:

1. Using a critical lens, what is the dilemma (or dilemmas) in the case?
2. For whom is it a dilemma?
3. Why is this a dilemma?
4. What values or principles are at stake?
5. What practical and/or policy considerations are at stake?
6. How does your racial identity development and positionality influence your feelings and reactions to the case? How does this impact what you think are the dilemmas in the case and why?
7. How does the racial identity development and positionality of the people in the case influence your feelings and reactions to the case? How does this impact what you think are the dilemmas in the case and why?

Case Discussion Reflection



Part 1:

REFLECT*: What new knowledge, perspective, or understanding did you gain from this conversation? What is something that was said that you hadn't thought about before that you want to remember in the future?

Part 2:

REFLECT and then SHARE: With the group norms in mind, what are some things the group did well in your conversation? (Feel free to share appreciations to each other!)

REFLECT and then SHARE: With the group norms in mind, what are some things the group could do better in the next conversation?