



**Book Review: Obidah, J. & Teel, K. (2001). *Because of the kids: Facing racial and cultural differences in schools*. NY: Teachers College Press.**

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*Our story is a difficult and complex one to tell because it has been quite an emotional process for both of us. Singularly and simultaneously, we have each experienced such difficult emotions as frustration, confusion, pain, suspicion, disillusionment, fear, anxiety and anger. On the other hand, we have each found the process to be encouraging, rewarding, moving, thought provoking and invaluable.*

(Obidah & Teel, 2001: 103)

This is not a book for the faint hearted. If you want a romantic novel about teachers, teaching and a recitation of apolitical pedagogical acts that transpire between researcher, teacher and student across racial and cultural boundaries - this isn't it! What you have instead is a book that openly confronts the strains of teaching in culturally complex environments. For those who prefer the rhetoric of 'civility', when it is only rhetoric – this book is clearly not for you. *Because of the Kids* delves beneath polite words and the use of third party voices that obscure emotion, allowing audiences to ignore the messy realities of high stakes research and vested interests. This book chooses a more frank and personally costly style. If you want a 'rational' account of cross-cultural experiences from the position of the detached intelligentsia, a product of 'neutral' and distanced stances, you're also out of luck. What you have instead is a book more futuristic and risqué than any galaxy encountered by Captain Kirk, Spock and the Starship Enterprise as they 'dared to go where no man (sic) has gone before'. Arguably, one of the last frontiers yet to be fully explored is not the space of green Martians and misshapen, grotesquely formed aliens residing without; rather it is the deep-seated aliens residing within.

The Aliens as spoken about in *Because of the Kids*, do not come in the easily identifiable shapes of bodies 'deformed' by their difference, or 'coloured' by the 'absurdities' of their life ways on planets distance by time and space, or stifled; marked inferior by their 'inability' to conceptualise their own lives. The aliens exposed between the covers of *Because of the Kids* are far more diffuse and insidious precisely because they are close yet not so easily seen. These aliens lurk not in outer space but in the deep, deep spaces within - the cosmos between our ears, the cavities within our rib cages and the space between the roofs our mouths and the tips of our tongues. It is in these metaphoric caverns where issues of scientific rationality, subjectivity and voice collide, providing the

gravitational forces that variously attract and repulse, where as Obidah and Teel negotiate a research terrain demarcated by colour, cultural, and ethnic and class based fissures in their quest to better meet the needs of the African-American children in Teel's class.

Obidah and Teel simultaneously the astronauts (as the controllers of their narrative shared) and the aliens (at times derailed by their own demons – stereotypes, undisclosed assumptions, distrust and episodes of non-communication) in this exploration are drawn to the launch pad by different motives. Teel, the Anglo-American white teacher, wants to examine how she relates to the African-American students in her middle-school classroom. In so doing, she solicits the guidance of Obidah to help critique her classroom processes and practices. Thus Teel steps onto the launch pad as a woman of 17 years teaching experience; confident (as a recipient of numerous teaching awards and a holder of a PhD from Berkeley), that with cosmetic tweaking the needs of her African-American children will be met. With Teel, apprehensions quelled by her well-documented ability to work with white students, she dons her space suit, attaches her oxygen supply to her self-selected mentor Obidah and prepares for take off.

Obidah, a woman of Afro-Caribbean descent, is also motivated to engage in the project. She is drawn by her concern for the number of African American children who spend disproportionate amounts of time in hallways. Hence for Obidah the collaborative project provides the chance to see first hand, and over time, how a white teacher's perception of African American kids influences her ability to effectively teach them. She was equally interested in seeing if, over time, negative views held by white teachers could be changed for the better. Thus Obidah also dons a space suit, connects it to Teel's and prepares to open the valve of life generating oxygen that will sustain them both as she steps onto the launch pad. Research becomes the vehicle (spaceship), their motivational influences define the co-ordinates and the kids act as the ultimate gravitational pull that keep the two travellers together on a three year journey that takes them to inner space (the place where values and beliefs reside), through worm holes of non contact and back again.

The book engages in the emotionally charged high risk issues rarely discussed or factored into the costs of embedding 'self' within research processes, mentor relationships, learning and teaching forged across coloured, cultural and ethnic frontiers. One of the primary costs (and potentially the source of their largest rewards) is the inability of Obidah and Teel to divorce their own values and beliefs from the site of study. The personal, political and cultural risks inherent therein intertwine as they struggle to make the implicit explicit between Teel and her predominantly African-American students and between themselves. The mentor/mentee relationship to facilitate Teel's ability to teach African-American students is an unstable space. While the relationship is primarily motivated 'because of the kids'; it quickly becomes evident that it is also necessarily self serving as well. Here the personal, the professional, the social, the structural and the cultural are brought into sharp relief - one juxtaposed against the other, where similarities, but most often, the differences overlap, intersect and at times outright irritate one another.

Chapter one, ‘Herstories’ Shaping Research and Teaching Practices’ centrally plots the co-ordinates of the personal providing substance to the claim that neither teaching nor research emerges out of a vacuum. Nevertheless, in the publicly reflected space ‘the personal’ often remains the silent, invisible co-ordinate - rarely plotted on navigational charts but always a potential ‘threat’ to the trajectory. The juxtaposed vignettes typify their polarized experiences growing up in very different social, cultural and economic communities that shape values, beliefs and prejudices. Chapter two, ‘Perceptions of African American Students’ moves into the professional dimension. Their ‘herstories’ dwell on school contexts where Obidah and Teel take stock of their separate teaching experiences with African American Students. Chapter three, ‘Critical Moments in Teacher Research’ is about ‘going the distance’ having the fortitude to navigate worm holes and meteor showers of colossal proportions that threaten to overwhelm them. The challenges at times threaten their resolve to continue the journey individually and/or collectively. At these times they must pause and contemplate the purpose and ultimate value of their voyage. Chapter four, ‘Racial and Cultural Perspectives on Student Behaviour’ draws us into Obidah and Teel’s different perceptions across race/class – contributing to disagreements about student behaviour, teacher authority and discipline. For Teel, asteroids of ‘cross-cultural disorientation’ collide. Chapter five, ‘The Risks in Crossing Boundaries’ identifies ‘risk taking’ as one of the strongest gravitational forces that simultaneously pushed and pulled these space travellers. The risks for Teel are articulated in terms of the gravitational pulses emanating from her concepts of ‘teacher’, ‘researcher’, ‘as a possible racist’, ‘as a colleague’ and ‘as a collaborator’. Obidah on the other hand is drawn to contemplate the risks of ‘trusting a white person’, ‘how this would be perceived by her own cultural community’ and what such an approach to research would do to her tenuous position as a developing scholar in the eyes of her own cultural peers and the communities in which she lived and worked. Chapter six, ‘On Cultural Conflict in the Classroom: Lisa Delpit Dialogues with the Authors’ reveals that at times third party navigators can provide critical insight. In the final frontier, chapter seven, ‘For those who Dare – Challenging the Nature of the Study’ the authors take account of the journey as they reflect on the process, the product and the new stances of each traveller. While there have been both trials difficult to dismiss, and tribulations as indicated in the opening quote of this review, both voyagers ultimately suggest the potential benefits that reside in these uncharted spaces justifies the journey.

Often the issues in *Because of the Kids* are oppressively close - perhaps too close for us to want to hold up for examination. This is because invariably in one way or another we are all implicated in issues of navigating cultural boundaries. The implications of constructing such a forthright narrative will be the mixed reactions evoked. Some may choose to avoid the less comfortable issues altogether. Others may take comfort in minimising its value claiming essentialist tendencies in a critique that by and large attributes all difference to race. Still others might take issue with the choice of topics shared, or dismiss it as simply subjective. Such potential criticism aside the book is not an easy read, but it is an important one.

The narrative accentuates the potential costliness of critically reflective practice. They reflect on their roles as teachers, researchers, writers, and as people seeking to understand, know and act in accordance with their evolving understandings of self – other in order to realise their educative ideals. Both of these women clearly make choices that effect/affect both the process and the product of the project. There are times where each resists and rejects the other necessitating accommodations on both sides. Through a process of critical reflection the aspects of their project that might otherwise remain unconsciously enacted are drawn to our attention as they are consciously and critically shared. It is a book written in a genre that is open, frank and pointed. It does not provide too many opportunities to hide or to read unattached and distanced as armchair voyeurs - though clearly at critical points given the luxury of a 'transporter' (used in Startrek as the ultimate bailout) there is more than one point in the book where both contemplated the line, 'beam me up Scotty – this has turned to custard'. While it was a luxury contemplated and for short periods of time over the course of three years an option taken, admirably, it was not considered a permanent solution.



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