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EAD 822 - Engaging Diverse Students and Families

Module 3-4 - Graphic Organizer Synthesis

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“The Wemmicks were small wooden people. All of the wooden people were carved by the woodworker named Eli. His workshop sat on a hill overlooking their village. Each Wemmick was different. Some had big noses, others had large eyes. Some were tall and others were short. Some wore hats, others wore coats. But all were made by the same carver and all lived in the village.”

Max Lucado’s children’s book titled “You Are Special” is one of my favorite stories. In the story, the Wemmick community has decided that their primary task in life was to rate or judge each other using stickers. Each has a box of golden star stickers and a box of gray dot stickers. The good-looking Wemmicks, made of fine wood and smooth paint always got stars. However, Wemmicks made of ordinary wood or with chipped paint received dots. Certain talents and abilities were valued in the village also. Physical strength, intelligence, and sweet singing voices were rewarded with stars while others, with no recognized skills, got dots.

This module detailed our nation’s racial history and the current ramifications of that history. The Power of an Illusion documentary explicitly laid out the historical timeline that has led to the racial and socioeconomic divides we experience today. Since arriving on this continent, and through the colonization of this land, light skin as been valued over dark. Similar to the Wemmicks, we have placed value on characteristics of the dominant culture. As the story continues, one Wemmick named Punchinello was particularly laden with dots in the village. Over time, Punchinello was afraid to go outside because he got so many dots, and never a star. In fact, sometimes Wemmicks would give him a dot for no reason at all.

“He deserves lots of dots,” the wooden people would agree with one another.
“He’s not a good wooden person.” After a while Punchinello believed them. “I’m

not a good Wemmick, “ he would say. The few times he went outside, he hung around other Wemmicks who had a lot of dots. He felt better around them.

The implications of Ashaunta Anderson’s survey regarding the health effects of racism can be seen in this moment of Punchinello’s life. Her survey appears to show that children who experience racism are at higher risk of health problems, depression, and anxiety. It is easy to see the ubiquitous stress that Punchinello is under always being considered a less-than-Wemmick. The village’s deficit lens oppresses him to the point where he begins to believe the values the Wemmicks have created are true. One interesting finding in Ashaunta’s work is that discrimination is stressful for all community members. “‘Community-level racial prejudice’ makes it harder for people of all races to form social bonds, which has been shown to lead to higher risks of death.” This indicates that in a divided society, everyone suffers from stress, even the ones with a lot of stars.

The turning point in the life of Punchinello is where, at the advice of a sympathizing Wemmick, he goes to see Eli, the woodworker. During their visit, Eli acknowledges the bad marks that Punchinello has received but follows with a counterstory that Punchinello does not expect. Christin DePouw and Cheryl Matias’s work on critical race parenting employs counter-storytelling as a way “to nurture our children with a humanizing love so that they see themselves as complex human beings who are impacted by but not defined by institutional racism and White supremacy.” Eli reminds Punchinello that he created him along with all the others in the Wemmick village by saying, “Who are they to give stars or dots? They’re Wemmicks just like you. What they think doesn’t matter, Punchinello. All that matters is what I think. And I think you are pretty special.” As this counterstory gets ingrained in Punchinello’s heart, the dot stickers begin to fall off his chipping paint.

This is the point where this story as an analogy fails, in my opinion. The take home thought in the story is we are all people so our differences don’t matter. This would be a

convenient thing for the star-studded Wemmicks to embrace as the ones who already have all the social capital in the village. Contrary to Eli's sentiments in this particular story, the meanings behind race and our differences over the course of human history do matter. They impact us all deeply. Now, I understand that the Wemmicks don't have the same historical context around stickers that we have around race and class so I can have grace for the resolution of this simple story—an encouragement toward kindness. However, teaching children to be critically conscious and culturally responsive will require more than this children's book. Punchinello could begin to see the value of the willow wood he is carved from and what assets he brings to the Wemmick Village. Then as he encounters oppression he would learn to peacefully resist and speak out against the systems set up to disadvantage Wemmicks that have received lots of dots. The other Wemmicks don't know what they don't know—the sticker system is the air they breathe. Punchinello's new understanding would require creativity to find new ways in defining social constructs that afford all Wemmicks, while embracing differences, the same value. In a culture with multiple layers of subordination, it is critical that we combat these systems through a “focus on healthy identity development, resilience, and action toward the elimination of racism and other systems of oppression.”