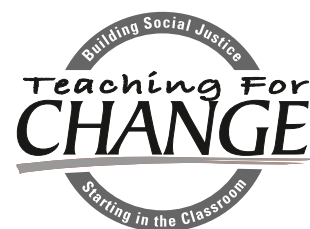


# BEYOND HEROES AND HOLIDAYS

*A Practical  
Guide to K–12  
Anti-Racist,  
Multicultural  
Education  
and Staff  
Development*



WASHINGTON, DC

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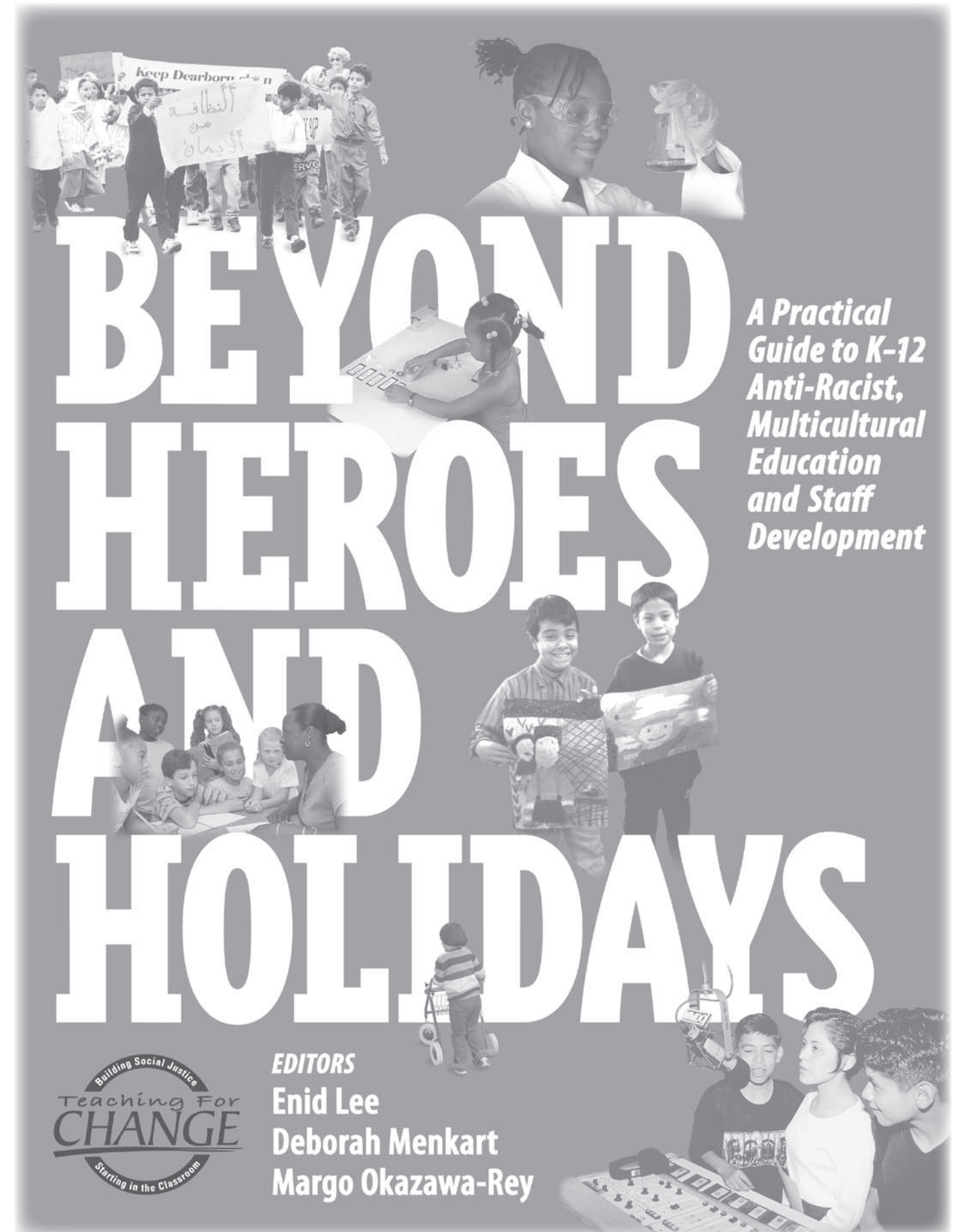
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# Contents

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Acknowledgments . . . . . viii

Introduction . . . . . ix



**School Staff, Family and Community Development** . . . . . 1

**Overview** . . . . . 2

Anti-Racist Education:  
Pulling Together to Close the Gaps . . . . . 3  
*by Enid Lee*

Educating for Equality: Forging a Shared Vision . 13  
*by Louise Derman-Sparks*

Affirmation, Solidarity and Critique:  
Moving Beyond Tolerance in Education  
*by Sonia Nieto*

Educating for Critical Practice . . . . . 30  
*by Margo Okazawa-Rey*

Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum Reform . 37  
*by James A. Banks*

**Lessons Learned** . . . . . 39

Teaching Whites About Racism . . . . . 40  
*by Christine Sleeter*

White Racial Identity and Anti-Racist Education:  
A Catalyst for Change . . . . . 49  
*by Sandra M. Lawrence and  
Beverly Daniel Tatum*

The True Colors of the New Jim Toomey:  
Transformation, Integrity, Trust in Educating  
Teachers About Oppression . . . . . 57  
*by Cindy Cohen*

**Activities for Workshops,  
Courses and Institutes** . . . . . 69

Personal Cultural History Exercise . . . . . 70  
*by Margo Okazawa-Rey*

De-Tracking the Tracking Dialogue . . . . . 73  
*by Deborah Menkart*

Tracking Teacher Expectations and  
Student Outcomes . . . . . 76  
*by Noni Mendoza Reis and Irene McGinty*

What Is the Bias Here? Staff Development for  
Critical Literacy . . . . . 80

White Privilege:  
Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack . . . . . 83  
*by Peggy McIntosh*

White Privilege in Schools . . . . . 87  
*by Ruth Anne Olson*

Developing Positive Racial Attitudes . . . . . 89  
*by CIBC*

**Readings** . . . . . 91

Do You Know Where the Parents of  
Your Children Are? . . . . . 92  
*by Hugh McKeown*

Why Do You Force Your Ways? . . . . . 96  
*by Frank Fingarsen*

Growing Up Gay . . . . . 98  
*by Katherine Whitlock*

Understanding the Needs of Youth:  
“Who ’You Calling Violent?” . . . . . 103  
*by Luis Rodriguez*

A B.S. in Education (POEM) . . . . . 108  
*by Toni Blackman*

When the Frame Becomes the Picture . . . . . 109  
*by Clem Marshall*

**School Staff, Family and Community Development | Readings, continued**

Dear High School Teacher . . . . . 114  
by *Kai James*

Dear Principal . . . . . 116  
by *Muriel Clarke*

What I’ve Learned About Undoing Racism . . . . . 118  
by *Andrea Ayyazian*

Distancing Behaviors Often Used  
by White People . . . . . 120  
by *James Edler and Bruce Irons*

“Every one of our teachers believed in us.” (ESSAY) . 121  
by *Debbie Wei*

Butterflies (SHORT STORY) . . . . . 122  
by *Patricia Grace*



**Reading Between the Lines: Critical Literacy . . . . . 123**

Lies My Textbook Told Me: Racism and Anti-Racism in U.S. History . . . . . 124  
by *James Loewen*

The Men (POEM) . . . . . 131  
by *E. Ethelbert Miller*

Bias in Children’s Movies: Pocahontas . . . . . 132  
by *Tom Roderick, Laura McClure and Chief Roy Crazy Horse*

So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans (POEM). . . . . 137  
by *Jimmy Santiago Baca*

Arab Stereotypes and American Educators . . . . . 138  
by *Marvin Wingfield and Bushra Karaman*

Media Myths Contribute to Hunger in Africa . . . 143  
by *Deborah Menkart*



**Language . . . . . 145**

The Best of Both Worlds . . . . . 146  
by *Marlene Carter*

Language Diversity and Learning . . . . . 154  
by *Lisa Delpit*

“Say ‘ask,’ Deneese” (STORY EXCERPT) . . . . . 165  
by *A. J. Verdelle*

Racism in the English Language . . . . . 166  
by *Robert B. Moore*

Yuba City School (POEM) . . . . . 170  
by *Chitra Divakaruni*

Equity and Literacy: The Challenge of the Decade . . . . . 171  
by *Enid Lee*

Bilingual Education: Talking Points . . . . . 178  
by *J. David Ramirez*

Linguistic Human Rights and Education . . . . . 187  
by *Alma Flor Ada*



**Lessons for the Classroom . . . . . 191**

**Early Childhood . . . . . 192**

Activism and Preschool Children. . . . . 193  
by *Louise Derman-Sparks*

Redefining the Norm: Early Childhood Anti-Bias Strategies . . . . . 198  
by *Ellen Wolpert*

**Social Studies and Language Arts . . . . . 215**

Students’ Stories in Action Comics . . . . . 216  
by *Debbie Wei*

Para Teresa (POEM) . . . . . 226  
by *Inés Hernández-Ávila*

Portrait Poems: Stepping into the World of Others . . . . . 228  
by *Linda Christensen*

Mountains of Prejudice; Streams of Justice: The Cherokee/Seminole Removal Role Play . . . 231  
by *Bill Bigelow*

The Institutionalization of Racism . . . . . 240  
by *Deborah Menkart*

Violence, the KKK, and the Struggle for Equality . . . . . 247  
by *NEA, CIB and CEA*

The Business of Drugs . . . . . 264  
by *Deborah Menkart*

The Cost of an Election . . . . . 275  
by *Ben Forbes*

Exclusion—Chinese in 19th Century America . . . 281  
by *Debbie Wei*

Angel Island . . . . . 291  
by *Debbie Wei*

Paradise and the Politics of Tourist Hawai‘i. . . . 293  
by *Wayne Au*

**Lessons for the Classroom, continued**

**Mathematics . . . . . 299**

Exploring Economic Inequities . . . . . 301  
by *Jan M. Goodman*

Reading the World with Math: Goals for a Critical Mathematical Literacy Curriculum . . . 306  
by *Marilyn Frankenstein*

The Algebra Project . . . . . 313  
by *Liz Hottel*

**Science and Geography . . . . . 314**

A Question of Biology: Are the Races Different? . . . . . 315  
by *Richard C. Lewontin*

An Issues Approach to Chemistry . . . . . 320

A Theme for Biology: Crop Diversity . . . . . 322  
by *Louis Werner*

Environmental Racism and Native American Reservations . . . . . 323  
by *Lynette Selkurt*

**The Arts . . . . . 325**

Taking a Stand: Student-Led Drama and Dialogue . . . . . 326  
by *Karen Donaldson*

Busting Ads with Art . . . . . 329  
by *Liz Hottel*



**Technology . . . . . 331**

Global Learning Networks: Gaining Perspective on Our Lives with Distance . . . . . 332  
by *Kristin Brown, Jim Cummins, Enid Figueroa and Dennis Sayers*

On the Road to Cultural Bias: A Critique of “The Oregon Trail” CD-ROM . . . 351  
by *Bill Bigelow*



**Schoolwide Activities . . . . . 361**

Cultural Clubs in Public Schools . . . . . 362  
by *Bakari Chavanu*

School Mascots . . . . . 366  
by *Barbara Miner*

Girl Power . . . . . 368  
by *Lisa Berndt, Amy Epstein and Valerie Minor*



**Holidays and Heritage . . . . . 373**

Heritage Months and Celebrations: Some Considerations . . . . . 374  
by *Deborah Menkart*

Holidays: An Anti-Bias Approach . . . . . 377  
by *Julie Bisson*

A Native Perspective on Thanksgiving . . . . . 379

Asian American (POEM) . . . . . 381  
by *Joyce Miyamoto*

Activists for Social Change . . . . . 382

La Llorona: Exploring Myth and Reality . . . . . 390  
by *Marta Urquilla*

Where I’m From: Inviting Student Lives into the Classroom . . . . . 392  
by *Linda Christensen*

Negotiating Pitfalls and Possibilities: Presenting Folk Arts in the Schools. . . . . 396  
by *Debora Kodish and William Westerman*

On the Question of Race (POEM) . . . . . 401  
by *Quique Aviles and Michelle Banks*



**Talking Back . . . . . 403**

Looking Through an Anti-Racist Lens . . . . . 404  
by *Enid Lee*

Compassion and Improvisation: Learning to Stand Up For Others. . . . . 407  
by *Linda Christensen*

“Talking Back” Stories . . . . . 409



**Glossary . . . . . 421**

Word Power . . . . . 422



**Index . . . . . 427**



About the Editors . . . . . 433

About Teaching for Change . . . . . 434

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# Introduction

If you are trying to make sure that multicultural education in your school is more than just a celebration of heroes and holidays, this book is for you. We believe that multicultural education should help students, parents, teachers and administrators understand and relate to the histories, cultures and languages of people different from themselves. But multicultural education must be much more than that. It must be transformative; that is, encourage academic excellence that embraces critical skills for progressive social change. Therefore, multicultural education must:

- instill the importance of academic excellence;
- examine the history and underlying causes of racism and its institutional features;

- teach the connections between racism and other forms of inequality;
- analyze the ways in which schools and education, as an institution of our society, have helped to support and perpetuate racism;
- teach how racism hurts both peoples of color and White people, and prevents us from being effective allies;
- show how White people and peoples of color throughout history have indeed worked together, and celebrate those efforts;
- provide opportunities to collectively envision just and fair schools, communities and the larger society; and
- inspire and empower us to do the necessary work to make those visions come true.



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## Our Vision of a Multicultural Society

Our ideas about multicultural education rest on our vision of a multicultural society. In a genuinely multicultural society, everyone would recognize and honor differences in race, ethnicity, gender, culture, class, language, sexual orientation, religion, abilities and so on, while also acknowledging the similarities of experiences and interests across these social categories. We also believe that a truly multicultural society would be a just society. People controlling societal institutions would do everything within their power to provide to *all people* the sources for meaningful livelihoods, ensure true physical and emotional safety and security, and create an ecologically sustainable environment for the survival of future generations.

We designed *Beyond Heroes and Holidays* to serve as a practical guide. We share strategies that educators are using in K–12 classrooms in many disciplines and in staff development. These strategies can be used directly, but more important, they serve as examples of transformative education. These examples make the goals of anti-racist, multicultural education tangible, and offer ideas and frameworks for the reader’s own school reform efforts.

## Our Educational Philosophy

Our work is guided by the philosophy of critical pedagogy, pioneered by Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. This philosophy is grounded in the beliefs that (1) the purpose of education in an unjust society is to bring about equality and justice, (2) students must play an active part in the learning process, and (3) teachers and students are both simultaneously learners and producers of knowledge.

Therefore we believe that schools should work to ensure that the barriers to student achievement are removed and that schools should promote cross-cultural dialogue and respect. But just as importantly, schools should be the place where students can analyze the forces which maintain injustice and develop the knowledge, hope and strategies needed to create a more just society for us all.

There is no formula for multicultural education from a critical perspective, only several general guiding principles. We kept these in mind as we searched for lessons and articles to include in this book. We asked ourselves, does the lesson:

- Draw on the knowledge and experience of the students?
- Help reveal the diversity and complexity of the issues and fields it addresses?

- Use a variety of instructional methods to stimulate students’ multiple ways of learning and understanding?
- Reinforce the idea that students have individual and collective agency and help to develop that agency?
- Convey a politics of possibility and hope?

Additionally, because we focus specifically on race and racism, we also asked, does the lesson:

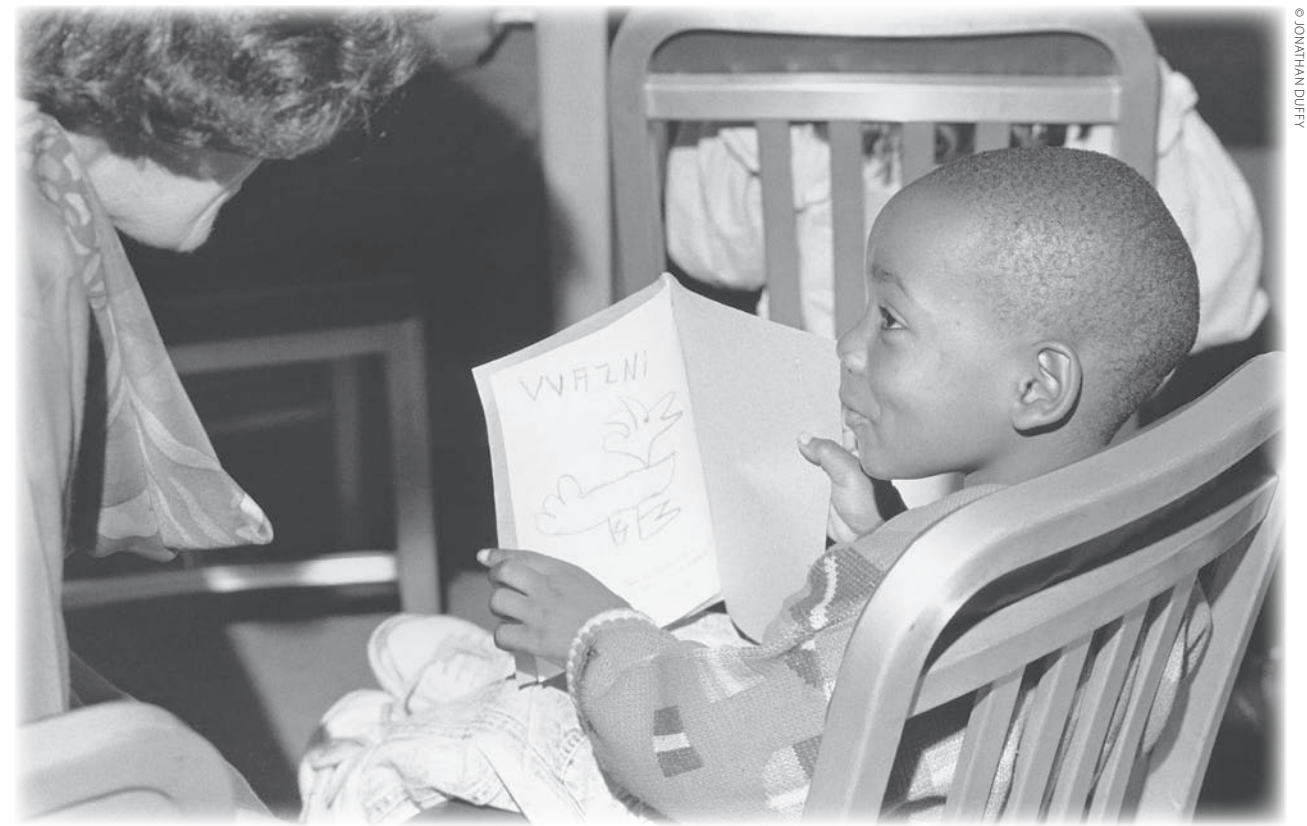
- Challenge stereotypes and correct misinformation about peoples of color?
- Expose the deep historical and institutional roots of racism and its devastating effects on both peoples of color and White people?
- Require a recognition of racism and its connections to other forms of inequalities?

## Focus on Race

We agree with many who argue that race is “both an empty category and one of the most destructive and powerful forms of social categorization” (Toni Morrison, *Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power*, 1992). Race is not a biological construct, with clearly definable features and characteristics, as most of us were taught to think. Yet, as it has been constructed in our society, race plays a critical role in many social interactions in general. Racism is pervasive and has an impact on all aspects of society.

Moreover, many of us know that race is always present as an issue in the organization, life and curriculum of schools, even all-White schools. But because the presence of race and racism is often neither acknowledged nor critically examined, students of color and White students are often left to assume that whiteness is the norm; students of color experience racism and often have no language acceptable to school teachers and administrators to discuss it, or spaces to address it; and many staff and parents find themselves without support or allies when tackling racism and general concerns about race.

In *Beyond Heroes and Holidays* we attempt to expose race and racism as they operate in schools by including lessons that help students, parents and school staff pay attention to race. For example, “The Cherokee/Seminole Removal Role Play” introduces students to one of the strong alliances formed between Africans and Native Americans in the early 1800s. The lesson “Exclusion—Chinese in 19th Century America” looks at the period of the Gold Rush through the eyes of the often-ignored Chinese immigrants who, contrary to the westward movement of European immigrants, began their journey from the west coast of the United States



A young author in the Books Project shares a book he wrote.

and moved eastward. “A Native Perspective on Thanksgiving” turns on its head the notion, still prevalent in many schools, that Pilgrims prepared a wonderful dinner for Native Americans who showed up with only corn. Through “The Institutionalization of Racism” students see the concerted and systematic effort required to institutionalize racism in the United States, which included teaching European immigrants to be White. Students explore how this served to oppress not only people of color but also working-class White people with the time-old strategy of divide and conquer. This lesson also makes clear that racism is not “natural” because it requires the force of multiple institutions to establish and maintain it. This analysis of racism conveys hope; if something was constructed, as opposed to being natural, it can be changed.

We also encourage the application of this lens of race to school-wide events. During Women’s History month, for example, event-organizers can look for racial diversity in the women featured in posters or assemblies. Or, in deciding which play to produce for the annual theatre production, producers should remember the works by African American, Asian American, Latino/a, and Native American playwrights.

In addition to analyzing school curriculum and activities, staff and parents can work separately and together to uncover and understand the racial and cul-

tural biases embedded in how the school is organized. For instance, they can analyze the ways the school is governed. Questions such as the following are useful in this task:

- Who has what kinds of power, influence and authority?
- How does race affect who has power, influence and authority?
- How is decision-making shaped by race?

The section on working with school staff, family, and community includes readings that can open up a dialogue among school staff and parents about the impact of race on the school as a whole as well as on individual children. An example is “Do You Know Where the Parents of Your Children Are?” which documents the successful efforts of one school to create a meaningful relationship with parents.

In our experiences with multicultural education, we have noticed that most of it focuses on racial and ethnic groups except Whites. By ignoring White people, and the underlying concept of Whiteness, it is implied that they have no race or that their experiences require no examination because they are the standard. We challenge that notion by including a number of lessons for staff development and the classroom that examine

the formation and maintenance of White racial identity and the particular role White people have played and can play in challenging racism. The readings by Sandra Lawrence and Beverly Tatum, Cynthia Cohen, Christine Sleeter, Peggy McIntosh, Ruth Anne Olson and others suggest ways that pre-service and in-service teacher education courses can help white teachers look honestly at racism and white racial identity. In focusing on whiteness, we do not assume that teachers and staff of color do not need to examine their identities, attitudes, prejudices and internalized racism. The “Personal Cultural History Exercise” helps both White staff and staff of color explore the impact of race and culture on their own lives.

Although we chose to focus on race, we argue that many dynamics of racial oppression can easily be applied to other forms of inequality such as sexism and heterosexism, and so forth. We, therefore, included several works that address those issues. “Girl Power” was developed by social workers and counselors to allow girls to explore their experiences of being female in a middle school. The discrimination faced by gay and lesbian students is discussed in “Growing Up Gay.” It is important to give more in-depth attention to these and all other forms of oppression and inequality as well as to develop curricula that examine and challenge their intersections.

### **Inequality in Education: The Convergence of Race and Class**

Issues of race, combined with class, undergird questions of educational inequality. The structures of inequality in the larger society—patterns of employment, the differential social, political, and economic status of neighborhoods, to name two—result in uneven distribution of resources to schools. In low-income communities of color, teachers may have very good intentions and progressive ideas, but inadequate resources or skills to address the needs of their students. Racial and class differences and inequalities influence even who becomes a teacher. Therefore, teachers and students seldom share the same neighborhood, similar cultural backgrounds, or life experiences. It is no wonder that teachers often do not see their students’ strengths, competencies, and areas of expertise. If we all recognize these areas, we have to ask, for example, Why are the students who are consistently late to class on time for other things? Or, why is it that some students seem lackadaisical about coming to school but take very seriously their family responsibilities in minding their younger brothers and sisters? Some of the lessons and readings in this book, such as “Students’ Stories in Action Comics” and “Portrait Poems,” are designed to help us see and appreciate the complexity of each other’s lives.

There are also lessons which demonstrate how one can create the kind of schools and classrooms that actively engage students. These include the “The Business of Drugs” and “Cultural Clubs in Public Schools.”

How we analyze academic and social problems in schools is influenced by two fundamental questions: What is the purpose of schooling? How is this purpose conceived differently according to the racial and socioeconomic characteristics of the students, school and school district? For example, in higher-income, predominantly White schools, students are socialized, encouraged, and trained to become professionals and leaders. From early years of schooling, children are prepped to fare well on standardized tests, with the aim of gaining entrance to “better” colleges. By contrast, in lower-income, primarily African American and Latino schools, students are often taught to accept lower status occupations or positions outside the mainstream, including prisons. Teachers and counselors explicitly advise college-bound high school students of color to settle for community college rather than university. Students with discipline problems, even in elementary schools, are described as “repeat offenders,” a term usually used to describe criminals.

### **Ways of Seeing**

As we stated above, multicultural education is much more than learning facts and information about people’s experiences, cultures and histories. It includes a serious examination of the Eurocentric cultural values, norms, and expectations that form the dominant perspectives through which many of us theorize about education and develop curriculum. Eurocentrist perspectives and methods and multicultural education are inherently in contradiction. It is impossible to develop genuinely multicultural curricula from only the dominant perspective because it illuminates only one set of experiences. As we worked on this book, we identified several key features of the dominant culture that severely limit the possibilities for a genuinely multicultural curriculum.

### **Focus on the Individual**

Dominant North American culture is centered primarily on the individual as opposed to many other cultures that place much higher value on family and community. This focus on the individual leads people to see themselves without a context of a tradition-bearing community. As Robert Bellah explains in *Habits of the Heart* (UCP, 1985), for example, most North Americans imagine that we autonomously select our religious beliefs, even though the great majority of us are the same denomination as our parents.

This focus on individuals is embedded in dozens of curricula that view racism as simply a matter of individual biases, ignorance and prejudice, and deal with racism as “prejudice reduction,” similar to a weight-loss program. It is up to the student, the individual, to shed their biases and ignorance. Students are told that it is up to them individually and personally to get along with people who are different from themselves. Primarily working at the individual/personal level does not lead to long-term change. While we learn to respect each other’s differences, the economic, political and social forces in the larger community and society further fuel the inequalities between us. For this book we looked for



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lessons and articles that address three levels of analysis: individual/personal (micro), community (meso), and societal (macro). These levels are explained in more detail in “Educating for Critical Practice.”

An example of focusing on the individual, rather than also looking at the community and societal context is how we, as educators, cover history and contemporary events. Poster series of famous scientists, artists and historical figures now feature African Americans, women, Asian Americans and Latinos/as. But the focus is still on the individual. Applying all the levels of analysis, we would begin to look at the groups, both formal and informal, that have made great inventions, historical events and even works of art possible. Herbert Kohl (*Rethinking Schools*, Vol. 5, No. 2) has noted how little of the actual life and work of Rosa Parks is illuminated when viewed through the dominant lens. She was an old woman, too tired to go to the back of the bus. Looking through a wider perspective, we see that she was actually tired every day after work, that her decision not to go to the back of the bus on that particular day was one part of a whole strategy designed and supported by

activists in Montgomery to challenge the entire system of segregation, and that she studied and worked at the Highlander Center in Tennessee with other activists from different parts of the country to become a more effective political organizer.

### **The System Works**

The dominant culture promotes the myth that the basic structures and institutions of the society—economic, social, educational—are fair and democratic. So whenever problems are identified, one’s strategic imagination only embraces “solutions” that address the symptoms. To address language differences we only need to put a sign on the door in many languages to tell parents they are welcome. We don’t need to look at how the school curriculum and policies treat language. In reality the basic structure may have to undergo substantive changes as recommended in the articles by James A. Banks, Sonia Nieto and Enid Lee.

### **Quick ‘n’ Easy**

Buy this item now, it will make your life simpler.” Five minutes of commercials provide ample proof that the dominant culture places a value on things that are quick, easy or simple. Unless we consciously rethink this cultural value, it will continue to shape many of our school practices. For example, if a child’s family name is difficult for teachers or classmates to pronounce, it is often suggested that the name be changed to something that the rest of the class is more familiar with. “It will make the child’s life easier,” is stated as the rationale. Who could argue with that—unless we decide that maybe making life easier should not be the goal. What if instead we choose to make it richer, deeper, more complex? What if instead of setting a goal of learning a name quickly, we set the goal of taking the time to learn it correctly? “Para Teresa,” “Redefining the Norm” and “Looking Through an Anti-Racist Lens” provide examples of how one can take a more complex look at the world around us.

### **Myth of the White Settler**

Growing up in the United States or Canada, most of us have learned, consciously or subconsciously, that White men made our country’s history and that other people (forcibly or by choice) helped out. Whites are at the center. It is this myth that compels educators, even multiculturalists, to see the need for multicultural education as a response to “the growing diversity” in North America. The truth is that this continent has always been culturally diverse. There were

many Native American nations with diverse languages, systems of government and ways of life even before the Europeans arrived, and some of their ways of life continue today, even under great threat from the outside. The first European settlers included people from England, France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Italy, Scotland and Spain. Early inhabitants also included free Africans, and Africans may have come as explorers even earlier. The children of Spaniards, Native Americans and Africans constituted the large Latino population in the southwestern United States that predates the Declaration of Independence. Asian Americans have a history of over 150 years in this country. The lessons “Lies My Textbook Told Me,” “Exclusion—Chinese in 19th Century America” and “Violence, the KKK and the Struggle for Equality” provide a more accurate picture of U.S. history.

### One-dimensional Lives

Argentinean author Luisa Valenzuela once commented that she could never write a book in the United States because everything here is flat, one-dimensional and linear. Time always moves forward in a straight line. Dichotomized thinking prevails so things are either one thing or another, good or bad, right or wrong, and so forth. It is this perspective that makes it easy to divorce ourselves from history, to move only in one direction at a time, to use only a singular perspective to see and understand the world around us.

Our capacity to deal with and understand complex realities is shaped by the perspectives we employ to do so. For example, effective multicultural education requires a critical reflection on the meaning and effect of our own racial and cultural identity and categories. This means coming to terms with the contradictory relationship of privilege and disadvantage most of us experience based on our race, gender and class. We may reside in the dominant group with one aspect of our lives, and yet be oppressed for another. For instance, a White, middle-class woman has access to many privileges because she is White and middle-class. Yet she also is subject to many forms of discrimination and disadvantage because she is female. For example, if her middle-class status is dependent upon her partnership with a middle-class man, it may very well change as a result of separation, divorce, or death. A third-genera-

tion, working-class, Chinese American man may be disadvantaged by race and class, but advantaged by gender. And so on.

### Format of the Book

The book is divided into nine sections: School Staff, Family and Community Development; Reading Between the Lines: Critical Literacy; Language; Lessons for the Classroom; Technology; School-wide Activities; Holidays and Heritage; Talking Back; and Glossary. The Staff, Family and Community Development section provides lessons and readings for staff development, and articles by practitioners sharing insights from their work. Many of the teaching ideas in this section could easily be adapted for use at the secondary level. The Lessons for the Classroom section includes teaching suggestions for early childhood through secondary school. These range from lessons about the genocide of Native Americans to understanding the electoral process. In Talking Back there are lessons for school staff and students on how to respond to injustices. There are also stories of how students, teachers, parents and administrators in Canada and the United States have spoken out against racism.

### Invitation to Continue the Dialogue

This book does not pretend to be all inclusive; we are keenly aware of its gaps. We would like to have included more on the intersection of racism and other forms of oppression such as sexism, heterosexism and classism. We included many lessons for social studies, but very few for math, science, technology, language arts and the visual arts. We are limited by our own perspectives, particular connections to the field, and lack of time. Thus, if you have articles and lessons to address these or other gaps you see, please submit them to Teaching for Change for consideration for our next edition.

We hope this guide will assist you in your work as educators committed to both the specific goals of multicultural education and the overarching purpose of transformative education: to be part of collective efforts aimed at helping all students become creative, caring, and responsible human beings and creating a secure and sustainable world for us all. ✨