Beyond Heroes and Holidays

A Practical Guide to K–12 Anti-Racist, Multicultural Education and Staff Development
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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 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;
- analyze the ways in which schools and education, as an institution of our society, have helped to support and perpetuate racism;
- teach the connections between racism and other forms of inequality;
- show how White people and peoples of color through-out history have indeed worked together, and celebrate those efforts;
- teach how racism hurts both peoples of color and White people, and prevents us from being effective allies;
- 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.

Collaborators

PSRTEC

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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:

• 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 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 cultural 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...
Inequality in Education: The Convergence of Race and Class

Despite the advances in civil rights, 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

As we worked on this book, we identified several key areas of concern. Although we chose to focus on race, we argue that issues of race, combined with class, undergird questions of educational inequality. The structures of inequality in the larger society—patterns of employment, housing, 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 perspectives. However, without adequate 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’ stories in this book, such as “Student’s Stories in Action Comics” and “Portrait Poems,” are designed to help us see and appreciate the complexity of each other’s lives.

Focus on the Individual

Inequality in Education: The Convergence of Race and Class

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. However, students in predominantly White schools 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 prepped to face 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.

Focus on the Individual

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 L. 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 focus, in looking at 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.

The System Works

Inequality in Education: The Convergence of Race and Class

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Inequality in Education: The Convergence of Race and Class

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 examples of works that discuss 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? “Pura 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 Setter

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ow 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 of this myth that complicates 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-generation, 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.