

# Teaching K-8 Students about Race

## African Americans, Racism, & the Struggle for Social Justice in the U.S.

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### Introduction

In the United States, race—perhaps more than any other sociocultural factor—is the most challenging and complex to understand (Omi & Winant, 1994). Much of this difficulty stems from the powerful yet often unacknowledged role that race has and continues to play in the U.S. context. Race is without a doubt a complicated, contentious, and highly charged topic. It is one not often addressed in schools and among teachers, yet one that concerns all students, particularly African Americans.

In this article we explore the challenges and possibilities of teaching elementary and middle schools students about the impact of the history of race, racism, and social justice on African Americans in the U.S. We situate this discussion in the existing literature that chronicles the historical limitations of curriculum knowledge about African Americans. We suggest that despite the long-term and continued concerns of the social studies curriculum, teachers could employ specific pedagogical practices to help students grasp important ideas and perspectives about the historical legacies of race and racism.

We show how teachers can draw from and expand the existing official curriculum in order to engage in critical examinations of race and racism. Utilizing real-life outside/inside classroom curricula interventions designed to promote social justice, we offer suggestions about how classroom teachers might effectively infuse content about racial violence and social justice into the elementary and middle school classroom curriculum.

Included in this discussion is a case

study that involves two eighth grade students who experienced unfair treatment by the police and those students' subsequent participation in a seminar with Harvard University law professor Lani Guinier. Through this case, we illustrate why making students' learning relevant to and connected with their own life experiences is vital to the pedagogical process of teaching students about race and racism in the classroom.

### Race, Curriculum, Teaching and Social Justice

In the discussion that follows we explore persistent historical and contemporary concerns about the curriculum and teaching—with specific attention to how these have related to issues of race in the education of African Americans. Our attention to the history curriculum and teaching in this context is two-fold.

First, few educational texts have received more public attention over the last century than those in the history and social studies curriculum. From the 1920s to the present the history and social studies curriculum has served as a source of public controversy, concern, and debate within African American political and educational discourse. Second, of all the areas in social studies, U.S. history is an ideal space to substantively explore issues of race and social justice.

An enduring concern regarding school curriculum for historically underserved communities is how to sort through the ideological interests imbued in the production and dissemination of school curriculum (Apple & Christian, 1991). For example, as far back as the 1920s, political and social groups have raised concerns about the content and depiction of minority groups in the history curriculum (Zimmerman, 2000). A consistent theme in these debates is on how groups have been presented in the official school

curriculum and the implications of these representations on understanding these groups' current experiences.

Additionally, targeting textbook knowledge, or what is also often referred to as the official curriculum, illuminates or veils the material interests gained by and the role central actors have played in past events of racial injustice. This knowledge also informs us about the long-term effects of such histories.

Thus, what makes the history curriculum a central space for debating issues of representation, national history, and race is that most if not all U.S. citizens are expected at one time or another to read, sing, and learn a common narrative of American history in school. The history curriculum, then, becomes a central apparatus through which to narrate a racial group's past and frames what we know of their contributions to the national imaginary. In light of these factors, another persistent concern raised about the history curriculum relates to the effect such knowledge has on African Americans themselves.

From this historical trajectory, we note how the history curriculum has played a prominent role in the way discourses of race and racial injustice are presented in schools. We argue that the current situation exemplified by limited textbook content about race, racism, and social justice—unless supplemented with other critical texts or additional knowledge presented by the teacher—is inadequate, yet it is likely employed unquestioningly by many teachers (both White or Black) as they enter and serve in our schools.

Given these long-standing problems and the contentious debate surrounding curricular knowledge about African Americans and its relationship to teaching and learning about race, the basic question we pose is: How then should teachers approach race and social justice in the classroom?

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## Approaches to Teaching about Race and Social Justice in Elementary and Middle Grades

Notwithstanding the clear biases and gaps found in curricular knowledge and teaching about race, all students—particularly those of color—benefit from a classroom curriculum that critically engages race and racism. Scholars acknowledge that social studies provides a key space where children and youth can and should acquire this critical sociocultural knowledge (Epstein, 2009; Howard, 2003). Knowledge about race offers a framework for understanding what it means to live in and effectively contribute to a multicultural democracy (Marri, 2003; Parker 1996) sets the stage for preparing students to believe in and act in the interest of social justice.

Yet in spite of the promise social studies holds for teaching about race and social justice, formidable obstacles stand in the way of meeting that goal. One such obstacle is the fact that many teachers feel uncomfortable teaching about race, period. This discomfort stems from several sources, including the lack of sociocultural knowledge that pre-service and practicing teachers hold about race and racism (Cochran-Smith, 2000), as well as the difficulties teacher education programs face in preparing teachers to teach in critical, socially just ways.

A second related obstacle is the assumption that race, and particularly racism, is a controversial topic that is inappropriate to teach to young learners in school (Bogatz, 2005). Researchers note, however, the positive outcomes that White and Black elementary-aged students, in particular, gain when exposed to targeted instruction on race and racism (Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007). In a study that examined the outcomes of teaching elementary students about historical racism against African Americans in the U.S., Hughes, Bigler, and Levy (2007) found that White students and African-American students both developed more positive attitudes towards African Americans, while at the same time, African-American students did not adopt more negative attitudes towards Whites. Consequently, those authors advocate teaching young children about racism as a practical means of improving attitudes about race in the U.S.

While it makes sense to seek out practices that improve the attitudes that people hold about racially different people, teaching about race and social justice must

lead to more than just a change in attitude. Social justice teaching requires that teachers approach their teaching in ways that support the active, engaged learning of all students. Such teaching also involves helping students learn how to recognize, challenge, and work towards the eradication of societal and school-based inequalities.

With respect to the elementary and middle school levels, existing scholarship highlights effective strategies for teaching about race and racism. In many instances such teaching does not require that teachers adopt radically different teaching materials or neglect teaching the official school curriculum. In the case of social studies, we argue that teachers can draw directly from social studies textbook knowledge to engage students at the elementary and middle school levels in discussions about race and racism. These conversations can occur alongside the teaching of traditional social studies content knowledge.

While we acknowledge that social studies textbooks do not always position racism, specifically racial violence targeted against African Americans, as structural and institutional in nature, we propose that contemporary texts can serve as a starting point for students to critically discuss race.

For instance, Parker (1996) argues that asking students to read directly from the text and use this knowledge to engage in critical discussion around the meaning, assumptions, and implications of race in the U.S. encourages students to actively construct new knowledge (Sunal & Hass, 2005). Imagine the discussion that might emerge after fifth grade students read the following excerpt taken from a Scott Foresman social studies textbook about the violence inflicted on African Americans during Reconstruction:

Some White Southerners also objected to the rights gained by African Americans. After the new state governments repealed Black codes, a group of White Southerners formed the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan's goal was to restore White control over the lives of African Americans. Members of the Klan burned African-American schools and homes, and attacked Blacks for trying to vote. (Boyd, Gay, Geiger, Kracht, Ooka Pang, Risinger, & Sanchez, 2003, p. 81).

From this text, students recognize that White Klan members targeted violence towards African Americans during Reconstruction with the intention of controlling the actions of Blacks, and to help gain back political control from the Republican

Party that was comprised of both Black and White members. This passage lends itself to critical discussion with students about the role racial violence played during the Reconstruction era in the U.S. This discussion might focus on the following questions:

- ◆ Why did the possession of “political control” matter?
- ◆ What could one engage in by holding “political control”?
- ◆ Was it the Klan members who wanted control or did these individuals act in the interest of others?
- ◆ Did it matter that Klan members chose to burn churches and schools?
- ◆ Was the effect of these acts greater than simply the loss of material buildings that, over time, could be built again?

Creating opportunities for students to identify the multiple actors who engaged in or supported, either actively or passively, the racial violence targeted against African Americans or other marginalized groups of color allows the teacher to also ask how these actors might have benefited from such actions. Collectively these questions (and other similar ones) ask students to critically evaluate historical instances of racism with the goal of helping students recognize the structural and institutional nature of these acts. They also provide a space for students to consider the implications these acts have on present-day social relations and conditions.

In addition to using school textbook knowledge to teach about race and racism, teachers can supplement the textbooks with fictionized books that specifically target racism at the elementary and middle school levels. For example, Ntozake Shange's (1997) picture book entitled *Whitewash* narrates a real-life contemporary incident of racial violence experienced by a young boy and girl of color. This story challenges the commonly held assumption that racism is a fixture of the past (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

While asking students to seriously consider the troublesome nature of contemporary acts of racial violence, this teaching approach simultaneously allows students to consider how victims of racial violence resist and challenge these problematic actions. These acts of agency offer a vision of what social justice looks like in practice and illustrate how even the youngest school-aged children can act towards these ends. Engaging students in this kind

of activity also allows them to draw from their own experiences and the real-life situations that either they or others they know have encountered around racism and social justice.

In a similar fashion, DeLeon (2006) illustrates how teachers can engage students in learning about racism through the use of

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newspapers and other print media. Having students locate and discuss contemporary instances of racism—paying particular attention to how the victims of this treatment respond—allows students to make a connection between their everyday lives and what they are learning in school.

As an example, recently both print and television media have reported that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a national advocacy organization focused on the rights and treatment of African Americans in the U.S., has denounced the growing political Tea Party movement as racist. What stands out about this particular moment is that it occurred in the context of (and in response to, some argue) the election of the first African-American U.S. President. Political debate has ensued around not only the issue of whether the Tea Party is a racist organization, but also if it is possible for both White and Black people to engage in “racist” behavior.

This is an interesting question that elementary and middle school students alike can engage. Given that both young children and adolescents recognize, take an interest in, and—in some cases—experience issues of race and racism (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001) in their own lives, it makes sense to ask students to discuss contemporary issues related to the topic. Requiring that students bring in newspaper or magazine articles that discuss race-related current events can serve as a catalyst to help students critically consider the nature and impact of race in the U.S.

Applying the practice of using race-reflective journaling from teacher education classrooms (Milner, 2003) to elementary and middle school classrooms, we propose

that teachers adapt this activity by asking students to journal, through pictures and/or words, their current understandings about race and racism. This will allow students to reflect on personal instances where race and/or racism played a role in their lives and how they or others responded. Doing this encourages students to draw from

their own racial knowledge, while also creating real-life curricula as a basis from which teachers can help students shape their own growing understandings of race and racism.

#### **Teaching about Race: A Case Example**

Valuing the racial knowledge that students bring with them to school is important, especially when teaching in the context of high-stakes accountability and testing. Testing pressures too often translate into teaching approaches that present curricular knowledge in a rote manner that is disconnected from the lives, experiences, and everyday realities of students. These concerns become exacerbated in schools heavily populated by African-American students who often experience higher rates of underachievement on standardized tests than do their White counterparts (Ferguson, 2003).

It should come as no surprise, then, that African-American students often come to school with a sense of apathy, boredom, and/or resistance about learning, and nowhere is this more evident than in the content area of social studies. Students wonder aloud and to themselves: What does history have to do with me? This clearly can be the case for African-American students who encounter a social studies curriculum that presents a history of Black Americans in the U.S. where they are positioned as objects, rather than as subjects in the narrative of America. Students learn that they were victims of racial violence. They learn that they were once slaves and that they were lynched and segregated. They also learn that Rosa Parks

sat at the front of the bus and Dr. Martin Luther King marched and had a dream that eventually led to African Americans becoming “free.”

African-American students do not need to possess a broad expanse of historical knowledge to know that something is missing from a history that positions them mostly as victims and implicitly characterizes the issue of race as a settled issue due to the courageous efforts of few African Americans. In response, students show resistance by completely disengaging in the class or by doing the bare minimum required to pass.

Teachers can respond by choosing to either engage in “business as usual” teaching (Sleeter & Grant, 2007) that does not seek to actively involve students, or they can find opportunities to probe and ask questions that will critically engage students in their own learning. We argue that through questioning and inquiry, teachers and students recognize the relationship between their own social realities and those from the past. When course content and student experiences collide, “teachable moments” emerge that allow both intentional and spontaneous learning to occur. An important opportunity to teach about race and social justice will occur in classrooms where teachers value and cultivate the emergence of such “teachable moments.”

#### **A “Teachable Moment”**

As former classroom teachers and school administrators we have seen firsthand what happens when teachers allow teachable moments to thrive. One such example occurred while we both worked as school administrators at a K-8 African-centered school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Carson School (a pseudonym) was nestled in a quaint, tree lined North Cambridge community that housed small brick buildings and bungalow style homes. In many respects, the school was situated in an ideal space for learning.

While the environment lent a calming quality to the school’s atmosphere, the students attending the school often came from past schooling experiences marred by low expectations, oppressive curricula, and poor teaching. Carson was started by a group of African-American community activists seeking to create a school that would value and place at the center a curriculum that aligned with the students’ background and experiences. Many of the families that sent their children to Carson were disgruntled with the schools in the surrounding Cambridge and Boston area.

They had little confidence that these other schools could or would successfully educate their children.

Our role as school administrators and teacher, in the case of Anthony Brown, was to help create a learning atmosphere that held high expectations for student learning, but that also actively and critically engaged students. We wanted students to realize that not only could they learn, but that learning should be relevant and engaging. One way that we approached this task was to initiate a variety of programs that linked the Carson student community with the surrounding Cambridge and Boston community.

One such opportunity occurred when we received a phone call from the Harvard University Law School asking if the students were interested in participating in a social justice project related to racial profiling. Given that racial profiling was a topic that explored issues of justice, racism, civil rights, human rights, and citizenship, we thought this project would indeed compliment our social studies curriculum.

When initially approaching the students about participation we were shocked by the number of students who had experienced some level of racial profiling in their lives. The students were thrilled to be part of this project and for the next three months they diligently prepared their projects and presentations on the topic. Later that spring the students would present their work at the Harvard Law School in Professor Guinier's law class.

During their presentations, the students eloquently spoke about their perspectives and experiences with racial profiling. They talked about fear, doubt, racism, and the inhumanity and injustice associated with racial profiling. It was clear that the students had put considerable thought and time in their work.

The law students and Professor Guinier were both moved and impressed by the students. Professor Guinier was so touched by the students' testimonies that she asked if any of them would be interested in writing their testimonies for her then forthcoming (co-authored with Gerald Torres) book, *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy*. What happened next illustrates what can occur when students' lived experiences become central to the social studies curriculum.

Two Carson students, Niko and Rashid (psuedonyms), who both participated in the project, had recently been arrested and were under investigation by the Cam-

bridge police for allegedly doing graffiti on the street walls in Cambridge and Boston. Niko and Rashid were burgeoning artists who had become interested in a form of art referred to as "street art." They both always kept a sketchbook in hand and one way they found inspiration was to visit and sketch out different pieces of street art they found on walls throughout the area. One afternoon, the Cambridge police were patrolling for graffiti artists and upon observing Niko and Rashid sketching in their books, the police placed the boys in handcuffs. Niko and Rashid were eventually jailed.

At the time of their arrest, many Carson teachers were concerned that Rashid and Niko were disengaging from school. This soon changed as they each became immersed in the project of telling their stories about racial profiling. They were eager to work on their project and this excitement translated into increased motivation to engage in traditional school studies in algebra, history, and language arts.

This teachable moment impacted not only Niko and Rashid, but their teachers as well. Those teachers realized that prior to beginning work on the racial profiling project they seldom had sought to make relevant connections between the classroom curriculum and the boys' everyday interests and lives. The teachers saw evidence of how, in an instant, disengagement and apathy for schooling could transform into student excitement, readiness, professionalism, and the holding of high standards for their own work.

The ability to write the story, however, was no easy task. While the story and incident was in the boys' heads and they each could verbally express what took place with emotion and detail, they struggled to get

their ideas on paper. After many painstaking drafts they were finally ready to email their stories to Guinier. Within hours, she had read each narrative and provided exhaustive feedback to Niko and Rashid. She asked probing questions and made extensive comments, pushing them both to say more and dig deeper into their story.

When Anthony Brown received Professor Guinier's comments, he recalled wondering if the boys would be disappointed, frustrated, or confused about how to address the feedback. Yet, the rigor of the questioning and review seemed to motivate each of the boys. The same afternoon they received the comments, they immediately went to work on revisions. Rather than becoming disgruntled by the amount of work that lay ahead for them, they were ready to dig in. They were moved that someone would think so highly of them to include them in a writing project. They now had reason to believe that their experiences mattered and that they really had something to say.

Some two years later, Niko and Rashid's stories were published in the *Miner's Canary*. Each narrative provided a full detail of the incident and helped to further validate the theoretical argument of the book: that through their experiences, the boys' operated as the proverbial "canaries in the mine." The story they told of racial profiling informed us that all is still not well with race relations in the U.S. Racism still exists. Yet in the midst of this reality, there remains a critical space to always push back and to resist. For the students at Carson, especially Niko and Rashid, they were able to do so in a way that stretched and reinvigorated their own learning.

### Conclusion and Implications

What occurred to the boys in the case study documented above is both profound and simple. If, as critical race theorists tell us, race and racism is endemic to this society (Ladson Billings & Tate, 1995), we can assume that when given the opportunity to analyze everyday life through social studies curricula, issues of race and racism will

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emerge. To put it simply, race and racism are already explicitly and implicitly part of students' lives and teachers and educators only need to provide a culturally-relevant (Ladson-Billings, 2009 [1994]) space for students to breathe life into their learning experiences.

Social studies teachers can initiate these kinds of learning experiences by posing critical questions to students about their experiences with race. Teachers also need to situate course content around students' lives, including both the experiences the students have and the communities in which they live. Creating curriculum around the resources found in the daily lives and communities of students includes drawing from the knowledge and the cultural memory community members hold.

When dealing with the topic of racism and social justice, students—both young and adolescent—can learn about the ways everyday people resist and push back against inequitable treatment. In a world that continues to deal with the harsh reality of racial inequalities, educators must attempt to reach students and allow them to bring voice to their own knowledge about race. By doing so we enrich the learning experiences of all students and move closer to realizing the dream of a truly just society.

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