

Examining Racial and Cultural Thinking

Not everyone feels comfortable talking about racial issues with students. A professional development program helps educators—even those with little experience—promote antiracism in schools.

To interrupt the cycle of racism, young people need to understand how prejudice and racism operate in our society. They also need to feel empowered to do something to change it. However, many educators are unskilled at talking about racial issues. Many teachers have had limited opportunity to explore these issues in their own education, and they hesitate to lead discussions about racial tensions for fear that they will generate classroom conflict (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997a). A middle school teacher stated the problem succinctly:

I am 35 years old and I never really started thinking about race too much until now, and that makes me uncomfortable. . . . No one taught us. That's what I tell my students. (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997b)

Teachers must understand their own racial identity to support the positive development of their students' racial and ethnic identities.

But avoidance is not the answer. Schools are reporting that incidents of racial intolerance and hostility at all age levels are increasing (Coleman & Deutsch, 1995). Because most teachers in the United States are white and were raised and educated in predominantly white communities, their knowledge of communities of color is typically limited (Zeichner, 1995). One way to address this deficiency in teachers' experiences is to provide them with multicultural-education courses or programs.

Addressing Racism

A two-year demonstration project, funded by the Carnegie Corporation, investigated the combined effect of interventions involving teachers, students, and parents in a small northeastern school district with an increasing school population of color (24 percent). The project had three components—an after-school cultural-

identity-group program for middle school students, a series of parent outreach workshops, and a professional development course for educators. Because I designed the course curriculum and coordinated the work with inservice educators, I will focus on that dimension of the project.

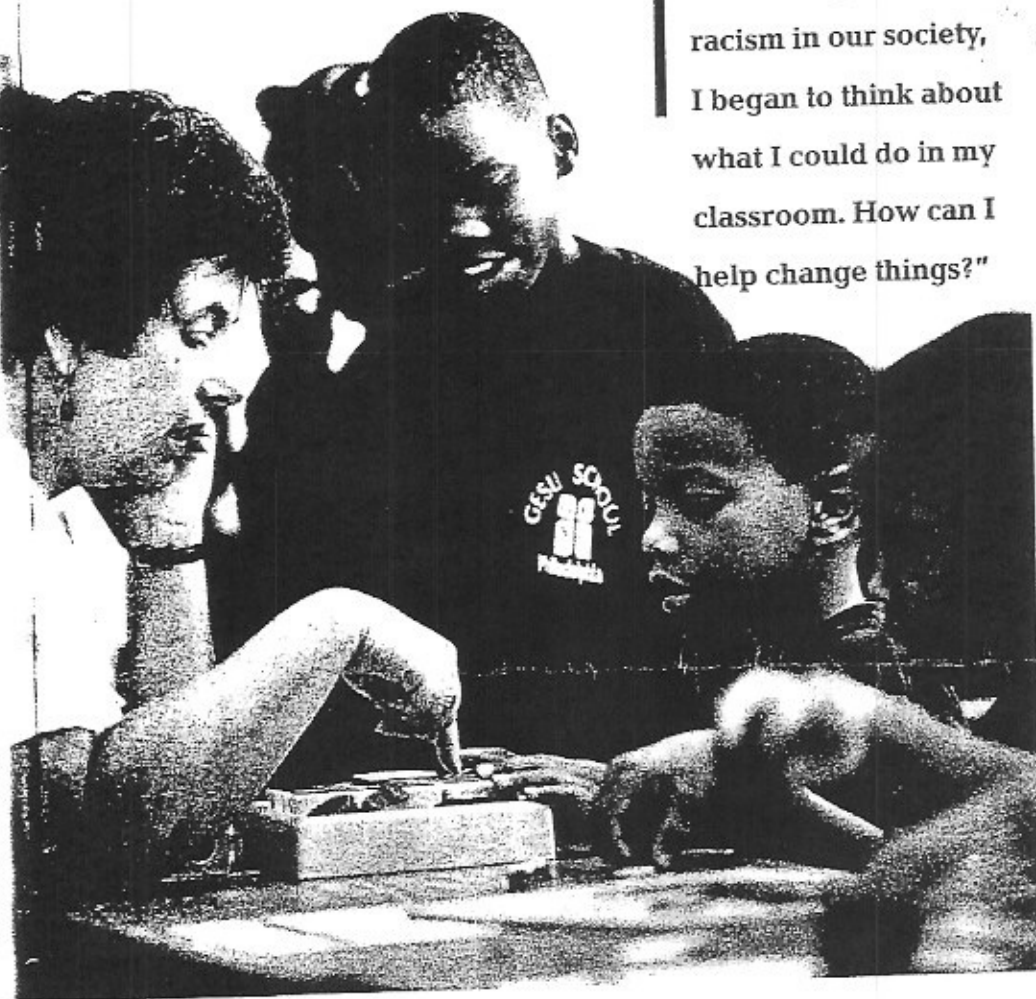
The professional development course required participants (24 teachers each semester) to examine their sense of racial identity and their attitudes toward other groups, as well as to develop effective antiracist curricular and educational practices that would affirm student identities. Teachers must understand their own racial identity to support the positive development of their students' racial and ethnic identities. They must also engage in racial dialogue among themselves to facilitate student conversation.

The professional development course, "Effective Antiracist Classroom Practices for All Students," was designed to help educators recognize the personal, cultural, and institutional manifestations of racism and to proactively respond to racism in school settings. Topics included an examination of prejudice, racism, white privilege, and internalized oppression. In addition, the class looked at theories of racial-identity development for both whites and people of color and investigated the historical connections between intelligence testing and assumptions about the "fixed nature" of student intellectual capacity.

Participants talked about the implications of these ideas for classroom practice. They wrote reflection papers on the required readings and had special assignments, such as analyzing cultural stereotypes,



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omissions, and distortions in their curricular materials. They were also encouraged to examine their own expectations and assumptions about the success potential of students of color.

In the first two years, 83 educators participated on a voluntary basis.¹ Eighty-five percent were white and 15 percent were people of color (primarily Latino). Most Latino teachers came from a neighboring school district and were offered slots on a space-available basis. The majority (62 percent) were elementary school classroom teachers or specialists, 19 percent worked with high school students, and 13 percent worked at the middle school level. Five

percent were district-level administrators. The median number of years of experience was 14.

Action Plans

As part of the course requirement, participants developed action plans that applied what they learned in the course to their own school context. I analyzed the action plans and categorized them by their ability to effect change in three parameters of schooling: the curriculum, the relationships among school and community members, and the institution's support services for students of color (Lee, 1995). Whereas some plans were just that—plans that had not yet

been acted on—most were "works in progress," in which the educators had already initiated steps.

Multicultural Curriculums

Fifty-six percent of the action plans involved some effort to make the curriculum more inclusive of people of color. A common first step for educators who are just starting to think about antiracist education is to develop bibliographies and purchase multicultural books and other classroom materials. Although this action may seem inconsequential, it can have a significant impact. For example, one teacher's action plan defined the problem as the state-mandated one-size-fits-all curriculum:

The problem is the absence of multicultural book titles in themes pertaining to the Massachusetts Frameworks. When a unit is studied, everyone reads the same book. This is good in the beginning to explain and teach all aspects of the novel: plot, characters, setting. But once students are aware of the parts, they do not all need to read the same novel. It is important that they read novels that reflect their own sex, culture, and religion on the basis of their reading ability.

Her plan was to

make a list of multicultural novels, with varied reading and interest levels, for each theme in grade 8 English class with Massachusetts Frameworks notation and to persuade the 8th grade teachers to use them.

Interpersonal Contact

Antiracist educational practices at the interpersonal level usually focus on relationships between teachers and students or teachers and parents. Thirty percent of the action plans fell into this category. Given that most participants were classroom teachers, and that the course content specifically addressed raising expectations for students of color, it was not surprising that teachers

who wanted to effect change focused on particular students. Eight action plans dealt with communicating high expectations to students of color. For example, a young white teacher was trying to help a Puerto Rican student who had already failed her class twice:

I was even hesitant about calling home to her parents. I am ashamed to admit that my first year with A., I made a lot of mistakes. I assumed her lower ability was due to lack of initiative. Maybe she had a terrible home life, which prevented her from getting things done outside of school. Rather than actually investigate my assumptions, I spent the semester taking it easy on her. I thought I was being compassionate and caring, but in reality I was sending a negative message: that not completing her assignments was OK.

When I first started teaching, I had a really difficult class with several minorities. I had discipline problems, so I discussed these issues with the principal. He gave me some suggestions, but what most stuck out was when he said, "Check with me before you call some of these kids' parents." For some reason, I felt fear or maybe intimidation from that statement. . . . This semester I called home; I had never called home before. That made a big difference. A. has a wonderful family, a hard-working family. Her parents are very concerned. . . . All of these false assumptions were based on the internalized stereotypical generalizations regarding people of color, which in fact clouded my judgment and ultimately undermined how I taught A. At the time I thought I was doing a good job, but now I realize she had been shortchanged. This semester I am on her like glue to do her work.

The student's grades have risen from Fs to an A- average. In addition, the developing relationship between teacher and student has helped the teacher see more clearly how racism operates in school. She now raises issues in her class:

Although not math-related, sometimes the racial comments regarding

experiences in school warrant discussions. Students need to know that these issues are real and apparent within our school and in our community. Some know all too well from first-hand experience.

Institutional Awareness

Action plans that challenged institutional policies and practices were less common. Perhaps such interventions seemed beyond the average teacher's sphere of influence, or perhaps teachers felt that the plans were too risky.

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Two Latino teachers compared the disciplinary actions taken against white and Latino students in their school. The principal viewed their project with some suspicion, but their results revealed a pattern: Puerto Rican students received longer punishments than other students. The teachers cautiously shared their findings with other sympathetic teachers in the school and began developing alternative strategies for dealing with discipline problems.

A white teacher in another school shared her new sense of empowerment:

As I thought about racism in our society, I began to think about what I could do in my classroom. How can I help change things? And it seemed to me that all of my students needed to feel empowered. One of the things that happened was that kids couldn't stay for after-school activities because there was no after-school bus. So a class took on the project of lobbying for a bus. They did a survey in the school, and they spoke to the school council to present their findings. The final result was that we have a bus now for two days a week. Their study has also been used to apply for a grant for next year. This class exper-

rienced a real sense of empowerment. I hope this experience will encourage them to work constructively for change. . . .

Recently, two students said to me, "I don't understand why we don't have a Puerto Rican festival here at [school]. I said, "Well, do you want one?" And they said, "Yeah, well, of course we want one." So I said I would help it happen. Since then, two girls started and planned a festival. It's become a real lesson in empowerment.

Building Antiracist Environments

Although the level of commitment and the degree of initiative varied greatly across the action plans, most educators acquired a heightened sense of responsibility and power to address issues of inequity in the school, to become allies of students of color, and to be antiracist role models for all students. Such awareness is a step in the right direction for promoting positive intergroup relations among youth.

A woman with 30 years of experience in public education captured it best:

As I write this action plan, I have to ask myself why I did not see the need for this or other services for children of color before taking this course. The only answer that I can think of is that I was insensitive to those needs and blind to the effects of racism that were all around me. . . . I intend to continue becoming more sensitive to the needs of students of color. I sincerely hope that we as a school system can capitalize on the momentum and energy generated by this course and build a truly multicultural environment for our students. ■

Participants were encouraged to examine their own expectations and assumptions about the success potential of students of color.

¹ After the grant funding ended, area school districts picked up the cost of the course, and it is still being offered as a professional development opportunity.

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