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Fostering Brave Spaces for Discussions About Race

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Introduction

I am a white social studies teacher and I teach in an overwhelmingly white community. My racial identity impacts the ways that I approach antiracist work in school. I seek to simultaneously confront racism in my classroom while also decentering my voice through visible self-reflection and the purposeful inclusion of diverse perspectives. There is no such thing as a single social justice unit or class that will eradicate racism in education these topics and discussions need to be continuously embedded throughout the curriculum, pedagogy, and policy within our schools. A classroom is a starting place. During the fall of 2020, I implemented a unit designed to establish and maintain a classroom community in which students develop social justice literacies. The purpose was to lay the groundwork for increasingly in-depth and potentially challenging discussions of systemic oppression and identity throughout the year.

Social Identity: An Entry Point

Young adolescents are ready to explore their own and others' identities with increasing levels of nuance. They are in the process of developing their moral compasses and regularly question the world around them. Many of the values and beliefs that people develop during young adolescence remain for life. It is crucial that teachers "support adolescents' quest for identity formation through curricular experiences, instructional approaches and opportunities for exploration" (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). Further, social identity gives each student an entry point for discussions about race and social justice regardless of their identities.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) provides a framework for students to understand complex interweavings of identity that dictate experience in society. Students first need to understand the deeply personal and social construction of their own identities before delving into the cultures and identities of others (Legaros, 2019). This is also a powerful way to build the community necessary for social justice work. "Hearing, seeing, and feeling the visual and verbal stories of others and having their stories valued and validated fosters a classroom community in which future discussions of race, colonization, and oppression can be discussed meaningfully" (San Pedro, 2017, p. 112). Personal and social identity is not only developmentally appropriate but a necessary starting place for social justice work that provides a foundation for in-depth explorations and analysis of society.

The Importance of Antiracist and Social Justice Curriculum in Majority-White Schools

Race and racism are key to understanding and dismantling inequity in America due to the persistence of the ideology of race and white supremacy (Picower, 2009). Kendi (2019) compares racism to metastatic cancer, insidious in the way it spreads and hides throughout the body. Like any other disease, racism requires targeted intervention. Much of the institutional intervention that is needed is beyond the control of individual classroom teachers and requires larger economic and social policy change (Anyon, 2005). That being said, teachers hold a critical role in interrupting racism within their schools and classrooms. Classroom-based antiracist and social justice intervention should take different forms depending on the community context due to persistent patterns of de facto race and class-based segregation. In schools that primarily serve students of color, intervention may take the form of *culturally responsive* (Ladson-Billings, 1995) or *culturally sustaining curriculum and pedagogy* (Paris & Alim, 2014). These pedagogical approaches seek to uphold and affirm the "languages, literacies, histories, and cultural ways of being [of] people of color" and empower students to navigate society while maintaining their identities (Paris & Alim, p. 86).

In schools that primarily serve white students, curriculum and pedagogy may take a different form due to the ways that race and racism are understood by most white students. The hegemony of whiteness remains entrenched in systems in ways that are not always immediately apparent, especially to white people. This is

compounded by individualism and claims of 'colorblindness' which serve to justify or hide racial disparities in a racist world (DiAngelo, 2010; Kendi, 2019). These historical ideologies "have left many white people racially illiterate but racially conscious when perceiving other racialized groups" (DiAngelo as cited in Eakins, 2020). White students lack the understanding and skills to be able to meaningfully engage in discussions about racism and other forms of injustice (Eakins, 2020; Michael & Bartoli, 2014). This means that they are unprepared to take part in a plural democratic society and dismantle unjust systems (DiAngelo, 2010; Eakins). The most common lesson about race white children learn from their parents is not to talk about it (DiAngelo, 2018; Michael & Bartoli, 2014). In a study by Bartoli et al. (2014), white teenagers were found to hold contradictory ideas about race. They simultaneously expressed 'colorblind' ideas while holding stereotypical beliefs about Black people (as cited in Michael & Bartoli). They "lacked a systemic analysis of racism [and, therefore] had no way of understanding the impact of the structural racism they observed around them" (Michael &

Bartoli, 2014). Teens often identified "any mention of race as racist" (Michael & Bartoli). White students hold inaccurate understandings about race and racism that perpetuate violence and oppression in society. It is the responsibility of schools to interrupt rather than perpetuate racism and other systems of oppression.

Antiracist Curriculum

Curriculum teaches students the value of different identities through the purposeful inclusion or omission of different voices and histories (Howard & Rodriguez-Scheel, 2017). Therefore, antiracist curriculum needs to "recognize the vital role racism played in the development of the economic, political, and social infrastructure of [America]" (Brown, 2011, p. 130). Currently, the majority of teachers shy away from teaching about race and, when it is discussed, it is treated as a thing of the past or is taught "in non-critical ways that reinscribe white privilege" (Brown, p. 130). Antiracist curriculum should include both discrete knowledge and skills (see Table 1).

Table 1

Components of Antiracist Curriculum

Knowledge and Understandings	Skills
• I can explain why race is not biological (Michael & Bartoli, 2014), but rather a social construct (Eakins, 2020; DiAngelo, 2018) or a *power construct* (Kendi, 2019).	• I can identify and analyze bias, racism, and anti-racism in language, actions, and media (Eakins, 2020; Michael & Bartoli, 2014; Kendi, 2019).
• I can explain why race is an important aspect of identity (Michael & Bartoli, 2014).	• I can interrupt when I see or hear biased remarks or actions (Michael & Bartoli, 2014; Teaching Tolerance, 2018).
• I can identify and explain the difference between individual and systemic racism (Brown, 2011; Michael & Bartoli, 2014; Gonell, 2020).	• I can take action and create change through civic engagement (Eakins, 2020; Teaching Tolerance, 2018).
• I can analyze the importance and impact of intersectionality on peoples' experiences in the world (Kendi, 2019; Gonell, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989).	• I can recognize and analyze both racist and antiracist ideas and actions in myself and others (Kendi, 2019; Micheal & Bartoli, 2014).
• I can describe my privileges and disadvantages based on my social identities (Eakins, 2020).	• I can use strategies to manage my "racial stress"(Michael & Bartoli, 2014; Gonell, 2020).

All students need to have the vocabulary and framework to identify both individual and systemic racism (Michael & Bartoli, 2014). Students need to understand that racism is not only found in deviant 'bad guys,' but embedded within themselves and society as a whole (Brown; Michael & Bartoli). Teachers also have a duty to prepare their students for the world outside of their context. Paris & Alim (2014) emphasize that social justice education and "cultural flexibility" is not just a matter of "giving value to all of our communities; it is also about the skills, knowledge, and ways of being needed for success in the present and future" due to the ever more globalized nature of our society and world (p. 89). This vital shift from 'colorblind' curriculum would lay the framework for a more equitable future by giving all students the tools to take part in a plural society and dismantle systems of oppression.

Beyond "Safe" Spaces

It is common to hear the words "safe space" in schools. This is understandable, students need to feel physically safe, unafraid, and emotionally connected to learn. In the context of potentially challenging topics related to race and other social identities, the question of 'safety' becomes more difficult to define, especially for students from privileged groups, facing the realities of oppression, and their role in that oppression, can feel uncomfortable. These conversations can bring up strong emotions including blame, shame, guilt, confusion, and denial (Teaching Tolerance, 2019). The question becomes "whose safety is being valued?" San Pedro (2017) asserts that:

> Learning is not often safe as it involves such profound transformation…The white-centeredness of education is what has led to consistently harmful spaces for racially minoritized populations. Truth would involve reckoning with that history and the less than polite reality of learning. (p. 102)

Rather than a 'safe space, San Pedro proposes the creation of *sacred truth spaces* where:

> Students are able to engage in the often vulnerable act of telling and hearing multiple truths…[where] safety is not necessarily the goal, rather, is creating a dialogic space to share our truths and to listen and learn the truths of others. (p.103)

Arao and Clemens (2013) refer to this as a *brave space* where students courageously and vulnerably enter discussions related to social justice. Sacred spaces where students bravely and vulnerably seek truth do not just happen. Merely saying "this is a brave space" does not make it so. These spaces need to be built on trust and community (Arao & Clemens; Kay, 2018; San Pedro, 2017). In order to build brave classroom communities, teachers must work with their students to:

- generate community agreements (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Gonell, 2020; Kay, 2018; Teaching Tolerance, 2019)
- build community connection (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; San Pedro, 2017; Teaching Tolerance)
- teach social-emotional skills and explicitly practice these skills in context (Kay; Gonell; Teaching Tolerance)
- establish norms for conversations that are practiced and positively reinforced (Arao & Clemens; Teaching Tolerance)
- allow time and space to debrief individually, in small groups, and as a whole community (Teaching Tolerance)
- plan for strong emotions and repair harm when harm is done (Gonell, Teaching Tolerance)
- scaffold discussions (Caskey & Anfara) through the use of sentence stems and discussion protocols (Teaching Tolerance)
- create affinity spaces for students of color (Parsons & Ridley, 2012)

Brave, sacred truth spaces must be continuously protected and reenacted throughout the year. It is an active process rather than a destination.

Implementation

During the first weeks of school, we started to build community, introduced the concept of social identity and justice, established norms, and prepared for strong emotions. I relied heavily on Gonnel's (2020) middle-level social justice curriculum during these first weeks. To develop norms, we first anonymously posted and then discussed our hopes and fears for learning about social identity, justice, and oppression (see Table 2). My students then wrote and voted

on norms that would help us achieve our goals and address our fears (see Table 3). We returned to these each day and throughout lessons as needed. To prepare for strong emotions we discussed comfort and learning zones, practiced strategies for responding to triggers, built connections, and engaged in accessible topics using new discussion protocols and norms. With these tools, we then embarked on new learning about social identity and justice.

Table 2

Students' Hopes and Fears

Hopes	Fears
"I hope that everyone respects each other." "To learn what I can do to try and help that." "I hope that when people see this and learn about this they will take some stuff away and actually treat people good and not be so mean." "I want to understand sexualities. I hear a lot about them. I want to know more to understand."	"I am concerned that people will not take this seriously." "I am concerned that social identities can lead to fighting and I know that sometimes they do." "It is unimportant." "It'll be sad." "People might feel uncomfortable." "I'm scared of saying something wrong."

Table 3

Classroom Norms

Listen to understand rather than respond	Be open to new ideas	When we mess up, we make it right
Stay present and engaged	Speak your truth	Be respectful of each other

Throughout this unit, we studied various social justice topics and concepts (see Table 4 and Table 5). I have many privileged identities and, in an attempt to decenter myself, I regularly shared personal testimony or art by people with marginalized identities. Lessons consisted of journaling, structured discussion, guided inquiries, and new vocabulary application. The summative assessment was an inquiry-based project that asked students to answer the question, "What do middle schoolers need to understand about social identity and oppression?" They were asked to use new vocabulary and concepts in their projects. My students investigated topics such as the school-to-prison pipeline, racial socialization in America, the long-term impacts of redlining, implicit bias, and institutional racism in Vermont. The concepts and skills that my students learned during this unit provided a jumping-off point for the rest of the year.

Table 4

Unit Vocabulary

personal identity	privilege	socialization
social identity	ethnicity	cisgender
positionality	intersectionality	transgender
oppression	perspective	empathy
institution	societal/cultural oppression	unjust
social/power construction	explicit bias	social class
gender	implicit bias	sexuality
intersex	stereotype	sex
individual oppression	institutional oppression	marginalized

Table 5

Unit Topics

Levels of Oppression	Social Mobility	Intersectionality
Positionality	Gender and Sexuality	Bias
Personal v. Social Identity	Social and Power Construction of Race	Justice

Reflection

Impacts

When we first started to engage in these conversations, my students often treated race and racism as bad words. They frequently avoided identifying race. Over the course of this unit, students displayed less discomfort and hesitancy. They now show a greater understanding of their multiple social identities and how they impact their experiences in the world. Social identity and justice concepts and vocabulary are now regularly utilized and applied unprompted in both writing and discussion. This has deepened their analysis of their own experiences, society, history, and current events (see Table 6). On an interpersonal level, the vulnerability required by this unit has created a more close-knit classroom community than I have experienced in the past. Students share their stories and ideas openly and frequently interrupt oppressive language with decreasing levels of teacher support. This is not to say that our classroom is without conflict, but students have practiced strategies to manage this conflict and powerful emotions effectively. I am thankful for the *brave space* we have created and recreated together.

Table 6

Student Reflections

"I have always believed people should be treated equally no matter what but I never truly knew the extent of things and the big effect they have on society, because I never took the time to educate myself. After studying this unit I now know that that showed a sign of privilege. Even though I always believed everyone should be treated the same, I never did anything to make that happen. I am now going to take the information that I have learned during this unit and use it towards making a difference in society."

"Everyone is different in their own way, everyone can't be the same as everyone else. You might have some stuff in common but not everything that you do. It's good to be out of your comfort zone sometimes."

"I have seen a lot of rude things but I always thought that they were people just being mean and it was just unfortunate not unjust. Now I see that many of them were forms of oppression."

"I knew what classism, racism, and sexism were, but I did not know how deeply embedded they are in our country. I did not know that they were the building blocks for our system of power."

"Many beliefs in our society are deeply embedded in our way of life. The concepts of socialization, the different levels of oppression, and implicit or explicit bias have impacted how I see our world through a different lens in which I understand how our progression and the complex, almost unfathomable way the oppression of some social identities is woven into our society."

Note: These are excerpts from students' final reflection after this unit. They were asked how this unit changed their understanding of society and themselves.

Areas for Future Growth

I am currently in the process of inventorying, analyzing, and rebuilding my curriculum. As I continue this work, I want to make explicit connections between historical and present-day

oppression. I have never shied away from discussing traumatic history with my students, but have at times failed to show the connections to modern-day systems. I also want to be mindful of balancing painful history with stories of the numerous achievements of people of color. Representation is important and students need to not only see oppression, but also resilience, creativity, joy, and brilliance. As I look to the future, I intend to "sustain [a] bias-free, equitable, and anti-oppressive classroom" by preparing for criticism and centering the ever-important and necessary *why* (Gorski, 2020). I recognize that this is a process and that I will never arrive. My goal is to continue to forge forward in this work to strive towards a world in which the amazing differences that we all possess are honored and valued to the fullest extent.

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