Critical Education

Volume 8 Number 2 February 1, 2017 ISSN 1920-4125

Turning a Moment into a Movement
Responding to Racism in the Classroom

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Citation: Epstein, T. (2017). Turning a moment into a movement: Responding to racism in the classroom. *Critical Education, 8*(2), 41-47. Retrieved from http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/186225

Critical Education Special Issue – The Legacy of Ferguson: A Referendum on Citizenship Denied

Abstract

Racism is endemic, yet racism is often thought to be a topic for debate. It is not. In this paper, I have assembled a range of several interesting or provocative ideas related to understanding the historical legacy of racism and inequality, as well as some potential solutions or actions to mitigate the effects of racism in today's society. These ideas are not exhaustive, but they provide a starting point for teachers making an effort to turn the moments we've seen in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis into a movement.

Over the last several years, the police killings of unarmed Black men have finally gained the attention of the American public. As a social studies educator, I feel the need to respond to these killings in a way that will assist teachers, young people and others in thinking through the ways in which our national history and contemporary society is implicated in racializing not just the criminal justice system, but our entire history and society. Racism marks every feature of U. S. society, from our expectations about who is "intelligent" and hard working and who isn't, to the loss of life through police misconduct. Therefore, as educators, we have a commitment to think about ways that teachers across the country discuss racism as it has unfolded historically and today.

What and how any particular teacher teaches about racism will depend on context: who and where the teacher is and what s/he feels comfortable discussing, who the students are and what they feel uncomfortable with, but still are willing to discuss, and what point you are trying to get across. That said, a few caveats: In the field of education—whether it be in relation to teaching history, literature, or more contemporary issues—a major watchword is "multiple perspectives." By this, educators mean that when presenting historical or contemporary actors or events, teachers present multiple and even conflicting views or evidence about the issue (Reisman & Wineburg, 2012, Parker, 2002). But in the case of discussions about racism and whether or not it exists as a problem of the present is not a debate. Although race may not be real, racism certainly is and if you have students who don't believe there is systemic racism, then you need to need to teach about it. So however teachers present the historical, economic, political, social or cultural aspects of racism, they are all relevant and necessary, but the idea of debating whether racism still exists or whether we're are in a "post-racial" society does not get us any further in identifying and responding to the problem of racism (Smith, 1999).

Since racism is endemic and can be interrogated from a variety of perspectives, below I've assembled a range of topics, some of which have been and others which have not been discussed in the mainstream press or culture. This list is not meant to be definitive nor do I claim that these cover the most significant aspects of racism. Instead, I've distilled what I think are several interesting or provocative ideas related to understanding the historical legacy of racism and inequality, as well as some potential solutions or actions to mitigate the effects of racism in today's society

Interrogating Racism

Relearn U.S. History

Understanding our nation's founding and development is fundamental to understanding contemporary society and race relations. The first step in analyzing contemporary race relations involves *relearning* lessons on U.S. history**,** lessons that put racism front and center. Instead of organizing national history around themes like the development or expansion of freedom or rights, a narrative in which things inevitably got better and better for more and more people, we might flip the narrative on its head and examine U.S. history with themes that highlight lack of freedom and exclusion from rights. Throughout history, certain groups of people did not have freedom or rights based on imposed racial, ethnic and gender markers (Smith, 1999, Takaki, 2008). In this flipped narrative, our nation's history is about people's struggles to overcome institutional racism, sexism and other types of oppression or exclusion. Once we introduce a historical narrative that acknowledges the creation, maintenance, and re-alignment of

racial/ethnic hierarchies, young people will have a historical context for making sense of why and how racism operates today (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Epstein, 2009).

Recognize and Resist/Repent for White Privilege

I am sure most readers are familiar with Peggy McIntosh's seminal article on White privilege (1989). The article is an important reminder of the privileges White people have by virtue of phenotype: Whites do not have to worry, for example, about less consequential things like being in the presence of people who look like them in almost every venue or finding holiday cards or children's dolls with people who look like them. Whites also don't have to consider more consequential concerns (e.g. being followed in department stores and malls, being able to get mortgages to live in most neighborhoods, and/or not being profiled by police or the IRS due to one's race). McInstosh concluded the article by asking White readers to consider what they will do with their acknowledgement of White privilege. Will we use our "unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage" or will [we] use any of our arbitrarily-awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base?"

In a similar vein, some White liberal Christian authors have discussed church members' role in repenting for racism in an effort to promote "racial reconciliation" (Campolo, T., Campolo, A. & Battle, 2005). Their point, like that of McIntosh, is that it's not enough to simply acknowledge or understand the role of racism in history and today. We also need to act against White privilege in ways that upends that privilege. Action against White privilege can be individual or institutional; the point is to act on your privilege in ways that make it visible and unacceptable.

Racial Reconciliation

In recent years, Ben Jealous, former President of the NAACP, as well as several Black congressmen, have called for truth and reconciliation commissions to investigate race-related crimes committed since the Civil Rights Movement. Truth and reconciliation commissions are one way that some post-conflict societies have dealt with systemic human rights abuses within the nation. The commissions are based on the concept that uncovering a government's (and perpetrators') violations of human rights and victims' testimonies of abuse is necessary for a successful transition from conflict to peace. The documentation from perpetrators and victims then becomes part of a historical record that no longer is hidden from view. One critique of truth and reconciliation commissions, however, is that while they create *an account* of past wrong doing, they don't have a mechanism to hold individuals or the government *accountable* for wrongdoing. In other words, they do not have the power to indict or otherwise punish perpetrators.

Although South Africa is the most famous example of the use of a truth and reconciliation commission, the U.S. actually had a Truth and Reconciliation Commission convened in Greensboro, North Carolina in 2004. The Commission was established to review government and extra-governmental actions in relation to an event on November 3, 1979, when a group of people gathered to demonstrate against the KKK. The KKK and Nazi Party members shot and killed five of the demonstrators and although there was a state and a federal trial, none of the perpetrators were convicted. Twenty-five years after the event, the city of Greensboro established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to evaluate the evidence and make

recommendations. They not only found that the KKK and Nazi counter-demonstrators engaged in the protest with "malicious intent"; they also found the Greensboro police department responsible for the violence because they had done so little to prevent it. The Commission concluded with what they saw as part of their legacy, to be a "learning tool for others in this country who, like Greensboro, are burdened by a legacy of hurt and inspired by the possibility of honestly coming to terms with their own history" (Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2004).

Reform of the Criminal Justice System

Since the acquittal of the police officers in the Michael Brown and Eric Garner cases, there has been a tremendous amount of media coverage on racial inequities in the criminal justice system. According to the Sentencing Project (2014), Blacks have been incarcerated at 6-7 times the rate of Whites, and Latinos at about 2.5 times the rate of non-Hispanic Whites. These disparities take on even greater meaning in the context of drug arrests. As Michelle Alexander (2012) reported in her best selling book, *The New Jim Crow*, in at least 15 states, Black and Latino men are sent to prison on drug charges anywhere from 20 to 57 times the rate of Whites. Overall, despite the fact that Whites, Blacks, and Latinos use illegal drugs at similar rates, 75% of people imprisoned for drug crime are Black and Latino (Mauer & Ghandnoosh, 2014). The recent killings of unarmed Black men and boys is spurring a re-examination of the criminal justice system and racial disproportionality. Marc Mauer and Nazgol Ghandnoosh (2014) report that in experimental studies, police officers were more likely and more quickly decided to shoot a Black subject than a White subject under the same circumstances. Police officers are twice as likely to arrest Blacks than Whites who have been pulled over for traffic stops; federal prosecutors are twice as likely to charge Black defendants with offenses that carry mandatory minimum sentences than otherwise-similar Whites; and judges are more likely to sentence people of color than similarly situated Whites to prison and to give them longer sentences (Mauer & Ghandoosh, 2014). Overall, questions about or solutions for overhauling the criminal justice system is a priority for responding to the problem of racism in U. S. society.

Restorative Justice

Another reform related to that of the criminal justice system is that of restorative justice. The concept of restorative justice is based on theories of criminality that maintain there is an interaction between individual and structural factors that produce crime. Rather than being centered on punishment as in the criminal justice system, restorative justice seeks to restore relationships among perpetrators and victims for non-violent crimes. Restorative justice is an idea that is being used not just as an alternative to the criminal justice system and prison, but also in dealing with school infractions. It is seen as a way to reduce school suspensions and expulsions, as well as the criminalization of school behaviors.

In a school system like New York City, for example, with 1.03 million students**,** there were 54,000 suspensions during the 2012-2013 school year; more than half of suspensions were against Black students, who made up 27 percent of the student population (Felton, 2013). And more than one-third of suspensions went to students receiving special education services, students who represent just 12% of the student body. Restorative justice in schools and society recognize how enduring injustices contribute to an individual's bad choices, and seeks to bring

the perpetrator back into good standing by repairing the relationship between perpetrator and/or victim and society.

Re-emancipation or Remove Roadblocks to Reentry

Approximately 630,000 people are released from state and federal prison each year (thousands more are released from local jails) and there are several serious barriers to their re-entry (Legal Action Center, 2004, 2009). Advocacy groups for former prisoners seek to mitigate the punishment that people with criminal records experience after they have been released from prison. Federal and/or state laws often ban people with criminal records from voting, applying for public housing and food stamps, being considered for certain types of employment, obtaining/renewing a driver's license, applying for student loans etc. Advocacy groups recommend that these bans either be lifted, so that someone who has served a prison sentence or their debt to society has a "second chance", or that each case be considered individually, especially for non-violent offenses (Legal Action Center, 2004, 2009).

Reparations

As our nation's history has taught us, Blacks emancipated from enslavement in the mid-nineteenth century did not receive 40 acres and a mule. Instead, they got Jim Crow: lynching, home burnings, chain gangs, endless humiliation and third class citizenship all around. In a June 2014, Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote an article in *The Atlantic* making the case for reparations based on the hundreds of millions or billions of dollars that the government and/or Whites had made from the sale, labor and/or property of Blacks. To cite one well-known example, Coates showed how the Federal Housing Administration, created in 1934, created a system of redlining, which included rating neighborhoods and housing values based on their perceived stability. Needless to say, houses in Black neighborhoods often did not qualify for FHA mortgages due to their perceived "instability."

Today, the new Jim Crow continues to constrain Black lives in the forms of school to prison pipelines, underfunded schools, unemployment, poverty and the legacies of segregated neighborhoods. Coates noted that idea of reparations to Blacks for enslavement and its aftermath has a long history in the U. S. beginning before the American Revolution. During the last 25 years, U. S. Congressman John Conyers each year has raised the issue of a Congressional study of reparations, while others have pursued reparations through court proceedings. Coates also noted that Congress has never voted to study reparations, even though there are precedents, such as those for interned Japanese Americans. And other countries—most notably Germany and New Zealand—have paid reparations to Jews and Maoris respectively—for the German holocaust and British settlers'/New Zealand government's unlawful dispossession of Maori lands. In short, reparations is an idea that has been debated and actually put into effect in some countries, but one which most Americans have never considered.

Conclusion: Reimaging our Classrooms

For years, educators have written about White pre-service and in-service teachers' fears of talking about race with their students (Crowley, 2014, Sleeter, 2001). Yet as Crowley's and others' work has shown, some White pre-service teachers are more willing today than they have been in the past to confront race talk in the classroom. I have found a similar pattern with my

White pre-service teachers. Ten years ago, when I asked my liberal-minded White students s at Hunter College--all of whom would go on to teach in low-income schools populated by students of color—what they thought about discussing racial issues in class, most responded that they wouldn't teach about race for fear of losing control, hurting students' feelings, etc. A few weeks ago, I did an unscientific survey of the 22 pre-service teachers (17 White students and 5 students of color) in my social studies methods class. Twenty-one of the 22 students in the class said that if they were teachers this semester, they would teach about Ferguson, recognizing the relevancy of Ferguson to their students, as well as the credibility and community they could create with their students by acknowledging rather than ignoring the legacy of racism. My pre-service teachers give me hope for the future. As I have watched the news about the killings of unarmed Black men during the fall and winter of 2014, I have been taken by several commentators' question about turning this moment—the moment of mourning for Michael Brown, Travon Martin, Jordan Davis, Sean Bell, Amadou Diallo and several others —into a movement for racial justice. Given the action on the ground in cities around the nation, as well as my pre-service teachers' understanding of the importance of facing rather than facing away from race talk in the classroom, I believe that we can turn this moment into a movement, one teacher and classroom at a time.

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Critical Education

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ISSN 1920-4175