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Schools in American Cities

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A Radical Proposition

In urban school districts in the Philadelphia area, students from Bryn Mawr College have come across a number of conflicts at praxis locations involving racism with children starting from kindergarten and moving into the high school level. It has become a concern that for some reason children of such a young age, before they have actually begun to create their own beliefs about race and equality, have acquired knowledge of racial discrimination and will actively discuss it without understanding the implications of what these might mean. It may seem logical to assume that by integrating slavery and other acts of racism throughout American history into earlier grades in the United States that this would desensitize children and by extension generations of Americans so that racism loses its power and the meaning can become somewhat diluted. A common thread of discussion that I have heard in social media is the idea that America tends to teach its history from the American perspective and thus often focus on people of European decent and how they fought through history as the protagonists completely disregarding other groups of people e.g. Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, and other members of minority groups, and the possibility that they too could be protagonists. Furthermore I have become curious about the intention behind focusing on certain parts of history and teaching them to young children who do not have the capacity for understanding them. It is my optimistic proposal that by eradicating the current American curriculum in history departments and creating an entirely new curriculum that I can create a strategy for change against institutionalized racism.

A student form Bryn Mawr College, Marla, went to her praxis course and was working with a young child in kindergarten who enjoyed playing with American Girl dolls, one of which was the only African American doll named Addy. These dolls came with stories that involve history and Addy’s story included becoming a free slave. Marla, a student of African American descent, was then told by a kindergartener that if she were alive when Addy was alive that she would have been a slave too. Although Most of Addy’s story focused on life as a free slave the child was more drawn to the details of Addy as a slave. In my strategy for change in the school curriculum I would propose that if a system where historical acts such as slavery would be taught to students of such a young age that educators emphasize that slavery was illegal and hurtful. With the intention not to harm the emotional development of these children I would add into the curriculum elements of self realization where students would discuss why it is that slavery no longer exists and that it was in place because many people did not understand that humans all felt and thought in similar ways despite their native land or native languages. By having these discussions “Teachers are particularly well situated to ‘produce... moments of contestation, challenge, and social change’ (Laurea & Horvart 1999, p.38)” (Monkman et al. 5). This could also be a way to link understanding of language and miscommunication within the classroom of those who do speak other languages. Rather than focusing on having to teach students that these acts of racial discrimination happened, curriculum could focus on critical thinking behind why these acts may have occurred and lead to discussion on the rationale.

In another praxis location Bryn Mawr Student Tina was working with a group of African American kindergarteners. Tina, a Latina with light skin, was abruptly approached by one of the students and told that she could sit in the front of a bus because she was white. Tina was a bit shocked and told me she would have liked to explain that although she had light skin, at that time she too would have been seated at the back of the bus, but her shock at this statement from a student of such a young age did not allow her to think quickly and the student just walked away. Again I am concerned with why students of such a young age are being taught about history that they cannot understand conceptually with ideas of racial discrimination and institutionalized racism. I imagine that this student was recently taught about Rosa Parks, most likely accompanied by Martin Luther King’s story, and I am glad that the student is making connections with academic subject matter in the real world but at the expense of whom? For situations I would propose that the academic curriculum in history would elect to teach about successful people of color like Maya Angelou, Louis Armstrong, and Condoleezza Rice. I am not suggesting that the curriculum make students blind to the discrimination that people experienced throughout history, but if at a young age we were to teach children of the successes of these figures to familiarize them with their character and as they reach a higher grade where these discriminations might be more understandable they could discuss these already successful figures and the struggles that they faced due to their race.

An example of institutionalized racism within similar races due to lack of information in historical curriculum is one of Bryn Mawr student Genesis that witnessed a middle school aged Latino of Mexican decent refer to another Latino male of Dominican decent as “el negrito” which means the little black boy. Because there was a lack of communication within the school curriculum on the varieties of people that can represent the same race, there is tension with a student who has a darker shade of skin. My proposition is supportive of one suggested by Duncan-Andrade, “Ultimately effective educators will be able to teach the concept of race as a social paradox. These discussions will help students learn to identify with the suffering of other students in the class and around the globe,” (113). By creating a space in the academic curriculum for discussion on race and diversity children should be able to empathize with one another and lessen the stereotypes associated with skin color. By creating this space in curriculum in conjunction with the aforementioned strategies, assuming that there would be no outside interference with racial discrimination and education, this system would create an almost racial colorblindness before describing the details of a dated society that held these values at such high levels of importance.

Strategies that have been given toward minimizing institutionalized racism put all of the pressure on racial education within the household. However, stated in the words of a parent that was told something similar, “‘Isn’t that what the schools are supposed to do?’” (Hurtig 206). Many schools put these pressures on parents and since most parents are not fluent English speakers, they accept that they are at fault because they believe that they are inferior to those in the American education system. If more pressure were to be put on the faculty and staff in the education system to change curriculum to include these discussions that are considered to be taboo, we can create a curriculum that surpasses the basic controversies of today’s society and encourage a new school of thought. The possibilities of including these discussions in combination with critical thinking about history instead of the basic memorization of dates, events, and documents could prove to be infinitely beneficial for current members of our society and more specifically new members of this society. Currently we are working in a society confined by its own limitations on race and that barrier has created difficulty in school setting so that curriculum is forbidden to discuss racial or ethnic properties and furthermore concepts involving religion. If we were to eradicate the current curriculum and work through a curriculum where we could acknowledge any and all races and acquire more information as new races are introduced and involve them equally into the curriculum we could focus more on the development of the mind rather than the memorization of concepts.

By eradicating the current curriculum and creating an entirely new optimistic realm with the strategies I have mentioned I would hope to eliminate the enemy that was also the driving cause behind most of these stereotypes: standardized testing. Because the education system is targeted toward developing results that are accumulated through standardized testing, teachers are forced to build curriculum based on memorization of information instead of development of character, skill, or critical thinking. Although my strategy is completely theoretical and most likely impossible, there are many schools, such as the U School, that are attempting to achieve these goals through similar strategies but with an individual interpretation on how to achieve that. If it were possible to fund a school similar to the U School or one that supports some of the strategies that I mentioned but starting at the very beginning in preschool or kindergarten, we would have the potential of creating a new wave of schooling and it would breed a society with completely new necessities from the industrial world. Jobs would transform and adapt to this new school of thought and this would create a revolution where I’m sure we would demand more of each other to create an even stronger society.

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