

Educational Issues Concerning African-American People

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I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ecto-plasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids-and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination-indeed, everything and anything except me.

-Ralph Ellison

Teachers should understand the social context of their relationships with their African-American students. For African-American children, what is done in the classroom does not occur separately from what has occurred in all their previous life experiences. For them, the school is an extension of the society about which they have been forming impressions since they were very young. Usually, school becomes the focal point of a child's activities outside of the family. The school provides a social context through which young people acquire their experience with adult authority outside the home. In schools, African-American children experience rules, and the consequences of violating those rules, in the presence of adult authorities from outside their homes. The school represents that part of society in which the African-American child must learn how to survive and, hopefully, thrive. The teacher is thus an authority figure in an important institution that strongly influences the self-concepts and worldviews of these children. The teacher's role is extremely important here. She has an opportunity to affirm or transform an African-American student's self-image and his or her understanding of the society in which he or she lives.

Children are always in the process of becoming who they are-that is, establishing their identities. This process involves synthesizing information from their personal experiences with others. An African American's identity has two basic elements which relate to society: (1) race, which is biologically determined by hereditary physical characteristics; and (2) culture (what they have learned about their membership in this particular racial group). What African-American children learn about being African American is greatly influenced by the experiences they have within the prominent institutions in their lives-particularly their families, religion, community, and the media. Each of these institutions provides information regarding values, norms, and meanings.

In school, African-American children are encouraged to learn what it means to be an American, a good citizen, and a student. They are taught to embrace mainstream American values and norms about how to think, feel, and act during their reading, writing, math, and history lessons. African-American students are evaluated by assessments that emphasize knowledge that does not consider African Americans, or their history and culture, to be significant. Too often, the educational experience of African-American students does not validate their existence as worthy

human beings. They acquire an understanding about the meaning of their existence through the symbols of American culture (for example, through television, books, and school). Through the Pledge of Allegiance (which includes several statements that contradict the personal experiences of African Americans and the social history of the United States), school textbooks which omit any representation of African Americans with experiences similar to their own, and through the denigration of their own language dialect (e.g., ebonics), the message they get is that they are not important. They do not count. They begin to question, "What am I? Invisible?"

Of course, the influence schools have on African-American children is not completely deterministic. Like all children, African-American children are individuals with unique personalities and the capacity for free will. We cannot predict a child's behavior based on one's social environment and surroundings alone. Anything we say about African Americans is bound to be contradicted by individuals for whom these generalizations do not apply. Most White people would be insulted if stereotypes about Whites were stated as if they applied to all Caucasian children! Why shouldn't the same be true for African-American people? Children are not, after all, empty vessels that wait passively to be filled with cultural information delivered through a teacher's lesson plan. Teachers who behave as if children are this passive are usually frustrated and disappointed when African-American children do not act and talk in the way teachers expect. They are resentful that these children don't show more appreciation for what teachers and schools do. Obviously, there is diversity among African-American children-just as there is diversity among Caucasian children-and this diversity is often ignored. Although many African-American children may have had similar experiences with racism and may live in comparable communities, their social development and how they cope with racial oppressions are not uniform.

Cooperative Group Activity:

Discuss the following questions as a group: Why do so many teachers treat African Americans as if they are one monolithic group when they don't deal with White Americans in the same manner? Why don't teachers take more notice of the variety of ways African-American children cope with this racism? How should teachers discuss these issues with their students?

African Americans do have much common experience. However, this common experience is with the cultural phenomenon of racism. *What makes culture important to the child is that particular child's awareness of culture and how it affects his or her self-concept.* Culture is learned; it is not inherited. Many African-American children are not that aware of the United States of America and its history. For that matter, neither are most White Americans. Typically, they have accepted instead a mythological interpretation of U.S. society and its history. If that interpretation told a story of the positive contributions of African Americans to American History, then the experience of African Americans with American culture would help to create positive self-images among African-American children. However, history-and the school curricula which teaches it-has too often told a different story, one which pays little attention to the contributions of African Americans. As a result, the historical texts and school curricula have caused African-American children to question their own importance and the importance of their African-American culture.

Children learn much of what they know about themselves as U.S. citizens from school. Much of this knowledge is superficial as far as understanding what it means to be an American, how American society is organized, how its major institutions function, or the history and dynamics of major groups in American society. Children are required to learn and recite a litany of empty patriotic slogans, such as "I Pledge Allegiance to the Flag," and spirit-numbing songs that praise an idealized America. They are taught to love their country-but not to understand it. How can people develop a healthy or accurate sense of self if they do not understand their culture? How can anyone understand their culture if they do not know its history? African-American children and White children alike are victims of the misinformation they are given with their education. Some students have personal experiences or sources of information outside their schooling which correct the misinformation they have acquired through their schooling. However, not all children are so lucky! As a consequence, every African-American student is not able to cope with racism in the same way. Consider, for example, two cases of incorrect information that are typically communicated in historical accounts: the freeing of the slaves and the Civil Rights movement.

Lincoln and the Freeing of the Slaves

Most Americans recognize Abraham Lincoln as one of the greatest presidents. This accolade is due in part to his Emancipation Proclamation, which reputedly freed Negroes from slavery during the Civil War. From elementary school on, students are taught that the Civil War was fought for the noble cause of freeing African-American people. Lincoln did, in fact, oppose slavery. He believed that slavery was a cruel, inhumane institution that undermined the moral integrity of White people of the United States. However, when Lincoln took office as president, seven states in the lower South had seceded and other slave states were moving to join them. He considered his primary objective to be the reunification of the country--not freeing the slaves.

After the Civil War began, the Union army had a manpower shortage. Many White people in the North refused to volunteer to serve in the army, and some defied the draft. Generally, the public was misled by the northern newspapers to believe that the purpose of the war was to free the slaves.

When Blacks volunteered their services to the Union army, they were rejected. Lincoln believed that allowing Blacks to serve in the Union army would further alienate the Confederacy. . . . [Later] considerations compelled Lincoln to reverse his Black exclusion policy. (Tripp, 1993, p. 320)

On January 1, 1863, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation declared that all slaves were free in the states or parts of states that were still in rebellion against the United States. However, slaves in the border states of Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware (which remained in the Union) were not affected by the proclamation. Furthermore, the proclamation had no authority to liberate slaves in areas not controlled by the Union military. African Americans, through their participation in the Civil War, were the principal force of their liberation from slavery.

The Civil Rights Movement

Rosa Parks has been credited with being the mother of the Civil Rights movement of the twentieth century. She refused to surrender her seat to a White man according to the segregation laws of the South. Under segregated busing laws, African Americans had to sit in the back of the bus. Every time a White person came on the bus, the section for African Americans would decrease. An African American could not sit in the same row as a White person. Thus, one White person could render an entire row of four seats useless to African Americans by sitting in that row of seats. This would leave three empty seats as African-American persons stood up in the back of the bus, crammed into an even more contracted space.

Many accounts led people to believe the reason Rosa Parks did not give up her seat was because she was tired, had been working hard all day as a domestic, and her feet hurt. This was the rumor fueled by the media. Nothing could be further from the truth! Rosa Parks had worked as a secretary for the Pullman Porters Union. She had been a civil rights activist for many years. She had refused to conform to the segregation busing laws on several previous occasions, as had many other African Americans. However, the much-touted incident was the first time Rosa Parks had been arrested. Because she was dedicated to the Civil Rights movement, she permitted the Black community leaders to use her case as a focal point to initiate a community response to segregation. Their actions culminated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56, which lasted eleven months.

Despite the disruption to the local economy and transportation system that resulted from this boycott, the racist White city government and businesses refused to change their laws. In a desperate effort to stop the boycott, they attempted to prosecute African Americans in court for not using the city bus services. The boycott was not ended until the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregated busing laws were unconstitutional. It was through mutual cooperation, self-sacrifice, and dedication to the cause of freedom, equality, and justice that African Americans were able to persevere. They desperately wanted to believe in the United States as defined by its Constitution.

Too often, as African-American children progress through schools, are exposed to television, and become enmeshed in the rest of American culture, they begin to accept inaccurate accounts of important social events as actual facts. These inaccurate accounts contribute to many biased beliefs, a few of which are listed here:

1. The idea that Blacks are helpless, lack initiative, and have low self-esteem. The way the history of such important events is told fosters an impression that Blacks cannot do anything for themselves-not even obtain their own freedom or demand self-respect.
2. The idea that basic civil rights were "given" to African Americans-that they expected something for nothing, without having to pay their dues.
3. The idea that African Americans are irresponsible, need supervision or monitoring, and cannot be trusted.

As African-American children are exposed to such inaccurate accounts and racial stereotypes, they begin to internalize the images being provided by such "authoritative" sources as their schools and television networks. Schools thus have a profound influence on the social awareness of African-American students as they venture beyond the boundaries of family. Teachers, and

the school itself, become the new authority figures. Because African Americans are not recognized as important in American society, the denial of their cultural reality has the effect of making them invisible.

Cooperative Group Activity:

Discuss the following questions: How can teachers provide a significantly rewarding learning experience about African Americans and their culture that is challenging yet not intimidating? Which different value orientations are demonstrated by African-American students of your acquaintance? What different attitudes about education do they communicate? What are your own conceptions about the contributions of African Americans to American history and culture?

Teachers must not treat all their students as if they are the same. African Americans have individual traits and strengths-just as any children do-which enable them to cope with the same situation in different ways. No one expects all White students to act the same way. They are treated as individuals. Why should all African-American children be treated as if they will act the same way? White students who go to the same school (or are in the same classroom) never perform identically. No one expresses surprise that different White children perform at different levels. In fact, teachers are often expected to devise strategies that take into account the differences in performance that can be expected among White students. However, teachers often do not adapt their teaching to take into account the differences in performance among African-American students. Instead, African-American children are frequently herded into special education, remedial, or social discipline programs.

Even when African-American children have similar conceptions about some things, they will differ in their conceptions of other things. For example, some African-American children may share similar Afrocentric conceptions of the United States while differing in their understanding of how they as individuals fit into, and survive in, American society. All too often, the experiences of African-American youth make them feel as if they are walking a tightrope. On the one hand, they must express Black pride and a sense of self-worth while, on the other hand, they are fully aware that they live in a society that holds negative views about African Americans in general. For these young people, there is a pervasive feeling that one is always being scrutinized and evaluated, not simply as an individual but as a representative of all African Americans. If an African American does very well, his or her performance is considered to be the exception that proves the rule. On the other hand, if an African American's performance is unacceptable, people will say that it is typical of all African Americans! This is a rather weighty responsibility for a mature, socially conscious adult. Just imagine, for a moment, how daunting this must appear to a child receiving such messages from so many different sources, including the major institutions in one's life such as his or her school!

Through their roles as educators and evaluators, teachers determine whether or not one is judged to have achieved an education. Education is a major factor in determining one's likelihood for entering and succeeding in acceptable occupations. Teachers should therefore avoid creating negative, "self-fulfilling prophecies" among their African-American students, just as they should avoid creating negative attitudes toward self among their White students. They must practice high moral and professional ethics. A teacher's challenge is to develop critical thinkers. Issues of

racism, like classism, have proven to be a volatile problem within the United States. A proficient educator has to be more than a caring person equipped with a bag of methods, activities, recipes and encyclopedic facts. Competent teachers must also demonstrate dedication and concern for their students-and their rights to equality and social justice. It is a teacher's responsibility to provide African-Americans students with an educational experience that confirms their sense of self-worth and respect as well as their knowledge of the subject matter.

Journal Activity:

Hieroglyphics (pictographs) are pictures used to represent a concept or idea. Many ancient people communicated by conveying messages through pictographs, which are one of the first forms of written language. Egyptian, Phoenician, Aborigine, Aztec, American Indian, and Chinese people used picture symbols as a form of communication and writing.

Create a hieroglyphic representation of African-American people in America. Be sure it communicates something about the racial, social, and historical relationships that African Americans experience. Use a variety of sources for your pictures (for example, magazines and newspapers published by African Americans).