

Perspectives on Critically Engaged Teaching and Race

In this series of related articles we present several alternatives to test-driven urban education “reforms”—alternatives that actively involve students in a critical analysis of their socially constructed environments, engaged discussions of race, and self-actualization. These essays hearken back to Twentieth Century theories of “critical pedagogy” championed by writers such as Paulo Freire and Bell Hooks. — the editors

Education as a Civic Right: Using Schools to Challenge the Civic Empowerment Gap

by Meira Levinson

Each semester I taught eighth-grade “Civics in Action” in the Boston Public Schools (BPS), students were required to take a standardized End-of-Course Assessment. One question asked them to select an issue “of importance to your school, your community, the country, the world and you.” Students were instructed to present the issue as a question, then answer the question from two different perspectives, offering at least three reasons in favor of each perspective. Finally, they were required to write

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an essay in favor of one of the positions they identified, supporting their thesis with evidence, details, and “a strong conclusion.” In June 2005, one of my students, whom I’ll call Jacquari (not his real name), submitted the following thoughtful and provocative response, which I have reproduced verbatim so as not to sugarcoat the challenges he faced in formal academic proficiency.

Should boston build parks to reduces violence?

Yes they should build parks to reduces violence

No they shouldn’t build parks to reduces violence

One reason why they should is to keep the peace the second reason is to have a place for children and the third reason is to have a place were we can run free.

1 reason why they shouldn’t is because their will be shoot outs. 2 reason is because people will be smoking and drinking in the park leaving trash behind them 3 reason is because gangs

will be hanging out let [late] in the playground and be distroying it with spray paint.

I really think they should be then again they shouldn’t because when there are different gangs contacts the fight always be in parks and suppose that there are a hole bunch of little kids in the park and then there are a group of gang members standing or chilling their then they enemies

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come over and start shouting at the others then some one lose they kid over some one else for nothing. Example when the girl was trying to leave the park in grove hall [a local housing development] because of a gang then as she was walking out the park she got shoot in the back and died.

Jacquari's essay is hardly alarmist. In the first six months of 2005, twenty-four people had been murdered in Boston, including six teenagers. Many of these murders had taken place in or near Jacquari's own poverty-stricken and racially isolated neighborhood of Dorchester.

My family and I live in Boston as well, in the rapidly gentrifying and increasingly White Jamaica Plain neighborhood. (Whole Foods moved in last year.) Jacquari and I are governed by the same mayor and city council. Our neighborhoods even border the same park, the largest in the city. But Jacquari's civic spaces are fraught with fear, as mine are not. When Jacquari passes an open space, he sees room for turf wars between rival gangs. When I pass an open space, I see room for a Frisbee game or a picnic. In this respect, Jacquari's city is not the same as my city. I don't see what he sees; I don't live as he lives; and no matter how imaginatively I try to understand the world from others'

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perspectives, my insights will never match his own.

Despite the fact that Jacquari likely never graduated from high school—he probably never made it past freshman year, given his abysmal academic skills and history of retention—Boston would be a better place if Jacquari were involved in its governance. Dorchester would be better off if Jacquari had the knowledge, skills and commitment to work with others to address the problems he identifies in his essay, as well as the many other civic challenges he told me about when he was my stu-

The civic empowerment gap is perhaps most visible in election data.

dent. Jacquari himself would be better off if he could translate his anguish into action—especially into civic action in collaboration with others who also want kids to be able to “run free” in a park rather than watch for a gun at their backs. Furthermore, Jacquari would be better off if he could have translated his knowledge of his own academic weaknesses into empowered engagement, into a declaration that his own education was outrageous and unjust. Jacquari deserved a real education, one where a fifteen year-old eighth-grader would have had the capacity to write flowing, compelling prose with a mastery of capitalization, spelling, grammar and mechanics. He also deserved an education that would enable him to exercise self-determination: individually, over his own life, and collectively, in collaboration with others, over the life of his community.

Because of Jacquari, and many other students I taught over eight years in the Atlanta and Boston Public Schools prior to my becoming an education professor, I have been committed in recent years to publicizing and trying to combat the *civic empowerment gap* between low-income youth and adults of color, on the one hand, and White, middle-class and wealthy youth and adults, on the other. This gap is as large and as disturbing as the

academic achievement gaps that have received significant national attention in recent years. It harms students and their families, the communities in which they live, and the nation as a whole. But although we've had incontrovertible evidence of the civic empowerment gap for decades, we have done little to address it, even in the racially and economically segregated schools where so many young people at the bottom of the gap spend their time. By reforming our civically *miseducative* practices in these schools, I suggest we can not only contribute to the empowerment of a new generation, but also strengthen American democracy in the process.

Evidence of the Civic Empowerment Gap

The civic empowerment gap is perhaps most visible in election data. Despite enthusiasm about the power of Latinos in the 2012 presidential election and the increase in Black and youth turnout in 2008, voting rates exhibit huge and stubborn disparities. In 2010, the most recent election for which we have demographic data, Black and White U.S. citizens ages 18-29 were 40-50% more likely to vote than their Hispanic and Asian peers. (Note that all of these data are about citizens, so immigration status is not a factor.) Young people with some college experience, furthermore, were more than twice as likely to have voted as those with no college experience. These patterns exactly replicate those of older adults, where again Black and White, middle-class and college-educated citizens outvote Hispanic and Asian, poor and non-college attenders by up to a 2.5:1 margin. The fact that these were mid-term elections does not seem to have been a factor: Voting rates in the 2008 and 2004 presidential elections betrayed identical patterns (U.S. Census Bureau 2010, Table 4b).

Reliable analyses of political participation, as measured by membership in political parties, campaign donations, campaign volunteering, par-

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Race, Anyone? High School Students Can Show the Way

by Lawrence Blum

“Why would slaves be interested in Christianity when we saw that slave owners used Christianity to justify slavery and oppress black people?” asked Hannah, a white student. “Jesus too was oppressed, as blacks were, and God was on the side of oppressed people who would eventually triumph over their oppression with God’s help,” Sherilyn, a black student, replied. “Maybe the slaves saw something different in Christianity, something the slave owners missed,” added Jean-Paul, another black student.

The three students were in my high school class on race and racism. I arranged to teach that course after many years of teaching on this topic at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. The high school is very mixed—racially, ethnically, linguistically, economically (45% low-income). That was why I wanted to try my hand at teaching there. The school administration agreed that we should try to put together a class that roughly mirrored the school’s demography. Blacks were in the plurality, but were also the group most turned away, since they tended to overenroll in much higher numbers than other groups. Whites averaged about 30% of the class.

In the school as a whole, as in so many high schools across the U.S. with mixed populations, in the advanced courses—Advanced Placement or Honors—white students predominated. Black and Latino students’ capabili-

ties of doing intellectually demanding work are frequently left underdeveloped, affecting where they attend college (if at all), how well they do in college, and what careers are open to them. I did not want my own class to contribute to that inequity dynamic.

Also, the few Black and Latino students in my class who had ventured into the advance-track classes at the high school experienced these courses

The subject matter of the course was the idea of race itself.

as small minorities in those classes. I wanted my class to give them something different—a high intellectual demand class where they (or at least the two groups together) comprised a majority of the class. We occasionally discussed these students’ experiences in those classes. One student, Ahmed, said, “When I am in an advanced placement class with mostly white students, I don’t speak because I am worried that people will wonder if I belong in the class—if I am smart enough. I am worried they will take what I say to confirm their suspicions.” Tenzina, one of the most accomplished students in the class, said she felt comfortable being in a white-

dominated class but not saying something that disagreed with the white students. I think the black/Latino majority in my class dispelled, or at least greatly weakened, this “stereotype threat,” as the psychologist Claude Steele has called the fear of confirming a negative stereotype of your group, for the black and Latino students.

Finally, I worked with the guidance counselors to send me students who hoped to go to college, but were not from families where everyone took it for granted that they would. I didn’t want students who were already “on track” to elite colleges. I wanted ones who were at best heading for state universities, and if possible non-elite ones like my own. I could not completely control this outcome, since students could choose to sign up for the course independent of what their guidance counselor advised. But for the most part I ended up with the desired “mid-range” students, with a very few heading to elite colleges at one end, and a very few not going to college at all at the other.

The subject matter of the course was the idea of race itself. We looked into contemporary science’s rejection of the classic idea of race (the revival of quasi-racial thinking based in contem-

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How Racism Affects Health: A Social Determinants of Health Curriculum

In 2010, PRRAC’s Small Grants program helped Seattle-based Just Health Action develop a middle and high school curriculum examining “how racism is embodied.” The project met with success, and lesson plans derived from the curriculum have been popular when teaching health equity concepts to youth, university students, promotoras and health departments. Since 2010, the curriculum has been used in North Carolina, Kansas, New Mexico and Washington State. For more information, go to <http://justhealthaction.org/services>.

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(RACE: Cont. from page 3)

porary genetics has become more respectable since I stopped teaching the course). This then motivated the historical core of the course—where the idea of race comes from. We looked at the historical developments in expansion, colonialism, and slavery, supplemented by developments in the natural sciences that from the late 1600's through the late 1800's led to the progressive development of the race idea and framework for thinking about human biodiversity. For example, we explored the role of Christianity in providing a religious justification of slavery (Africans are “heathens”) that then had to give way, under pressure from the conversion of most blacks to Christianity, to a more distinctly racial one (Blacks are inherently inferior and are capable of no better than being slaves). And we looked at various forms of resistance to slavery—especially slave revolts, runaways, and the Abolitionist movement. Finally, we spent some time on the Latin American and Caribbean experiences of slavery, and the conceptions of race that emerged from them, compared with the United States. This comparative perspective helped the students see how race was not just a fact of nature but was understood differently in different national and regional contexts. Since sev-

eral of the students' ancestry lay in Latin America or the Caribbean, this perspective also helped them understand the common mismatch in the ways they or their parents understood race from their home countries with the racial order in the U.S.

The exchange at the beginning of this article was from our unit on David Walker, an influential (but still too-little known to most Americans) black Abolitionist whose militant anti-slavery agitation, expressed in his 1830 treatise, *The Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, gave the students the opportunity to see a black committed anti-racist using ideas to fight against slavery. Walker urged blacks to read Thomas Jefferson's writings arguing for the innate inferiority of black people and to develop their

Students are hungering to explore and engage with one another about racial issues.

own arguments against him. (We also read those writings of Jefferson.) Walker was also a deeply religious Methodist, and Sherilyn and Jean-Paul were able to see how he could view Christianity as a philosophy of liberation. Walker wedded words to organizing by arranging to have copies of

his treatise smuggled into slave territory; his success in doing so led several Southern states to tighten their laws against both slave literacy and “seditious” literature.

As part of that discussion, we looked at Walker's criticism of Jefferson for saying that blacks' skin color is “unfortunate.” Walker is outraged by this statement and says that blacks are pleased with the skin color God gave them. I asked the students whether they thought Walker was saying that everyone should be proud of their skin color, including whites. Their response showed their deepening reflectiveness about racial issues:

Clara (Latina): It should be the same. But pride in being white has a more negative connotation, because it is always connected to being superior.

Student Responses

Pema (Asian-American): White isn't seen as negative. If you look in the dictionary the definitions of “white” are all positive—like lightness, sun, purity. Black is connected with dark, something you're afraid of.

Adam (white): Whites have power, and white pride is connected with that. But still, saying you are proud to be white isn't necessarily supporting white superiority.

Sherilyn (black): If a white person said, “I'm proud of being white,” my first reaction would be, “Are you saying you are better than me?”

Pema (Asian-American): Even if you should be able to say you are proud of being white, if somebody said that to me, I'd react against it.

Tenzina (Asian-American/Latina): What are you actually proud of? In the case of blacks, it is empowering to take pride in your skin color.

Anna (white): You don't have pride in your skin color. You have pride in your culture.

Jacques (black): You can have pride in your skin color if there is an ideology that says your skin color is bad, like Jefferson's view. And then you can have pride to reject that ideology.

You can see the students struggling

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Resources

David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, edited by Peter Hinks (Pennsylvania State Press, 2000 [originally 1830])

Audrey and Brian Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*, 4th edition (Westview Press, 2012)

Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1998)

Gary Nash, *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early North America*, 6th edition (Prentice-Hall, 2009)

Jeannie Oakes, Martin Lipton, Lauren Anderson and Jamy Stillman, *TEACHING to CHANGE the WORLD*, 4th Edition (Paradigm, 2012)

Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching (PRRAC, 2004)

Mindfulness as Method: Teaching for Connection in a Dehumanizing Context

by Lisa (Leigh) Patel, Katharine Atkins-Pattenson, Daniel Healy, Jessica Gold Haralson, Luis Rosario & Jianan Shi

Anti-racist education can arguably be called an oxymoron in and of itself. Take, for example, that in schools across the nation, low-income students of color continue to be taught by teachers, mostly white, female and from middle-class backgrounds (Sleeter, 2001). Those teachers arrive in schools with strategies and methods for teaching underprivileged young people,

strategies that are taught in both traditional university courses and alternative certification programs. The idea is that with the “right” method, the achievement gap between races can be closed. Myriad scholars and educators have called out the flawed logic in thinking that decontextualized strategies can stand a chance against a deeply stratified society that is reproduced with disturbing efficiency through schooling (e.g., Bartolomé, 1994; Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Luke, 2011). As a contrast, humanizing pedagogy has long been a goal of formal and informal education (Freire, 1970). But for teachers, particularly

we discussed what this approach afforded. We close with cautions for how to proceed with mindfulness as methods in education.

Context (from Leigh)

In the Fall of 2012, approximately 25 Donovan Urban Teaching Scholars (the Donovan Urban Teaching Scholar Program is a cohort-based program for teachers dedicated to urban education) continued their year-long cohort program of teacher education with a course entitled, “Literacy Practices and Assessment.” As a cohort, the Donovans, as they are affectionately known to themselves and others, had already spent an intensive summer together studying educational foundations and building group cohesion. As the instructor of this course and as a lifelong educator committed to liberatory practices, as well as someone versed in the mind-body practices of yoga and meditation, I had often felt the divide between how higher education views knowledge as residing in the mind (read this; write that), and how contemplative practices see mind and body intertwined. Implicit in the almost exclusive mind focus of the teacher preparation is a theory of change that if beginning teachers read and write enough about oppression, well, they’ll simply stop those practices. As decades of research shows, though, even changing the written word often does not result in equity, as evidenced by the ongoing challenge of desegregating our nation’s schools (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012).

I had always known there was something significant missing or misaligned with how we prepared teachers for working with populations consistently

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I started each class with 2-3 minutes of meditation.

beginning teachers, precisely how to engage in a humanizing pedagogy is elusive. Put more simply, for teachers committed to liberatory, anti-racist education, there’s a large gap of knowledge between grab bags of methods and mission statements about humanization and social justice. In this article, we argue that part of what is missing is a deliberate humanizing of the teaching and learning experience, within teacher education. We share our attempts to use the contemplative practices of mindfulness out of a direct desire to teach and learn through human connection. The authors include the course instructor and graduate students from a masters level course in literacy methods that occurred in Fall 2012 with a cohort of beginning teachers preparing to teach in urban contexts. We provide a brief overview of the mindfulness practices used in the course, the justifications of why, and then snippets of our conversations as

dispossessed in society, but I had also grappled for what might be a better, or at least more humanizing way of going about this important work. I also felt the need to more holistically support politically conscious teachers, many of whom are people of color, as they engage in the herculean efforts to interrupt the deeply oppressive practices visited on them and their students every day. In fact, this was one of the key areas of focus in the Donovan cohort, which was composed overwhelmingly by racially minoritized adults, many of whom were first-time college-goers in their families.

As I was listening to a radio program which highlighted the ways that meditation has been proven to be effective for interrupting the post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms for children and teens who had lived in highly volatile circumstances (van der Volk, 2006), something clicked for me. As someone who had experienced both the benefits of this kind of practice for interrupting the cacophony of pride, blame, anger and hurt that races through our minds seemingly all day, and as a woman of color who has come from and has taught in low-income settings, I saw an opportunity to interrupt the decontextualized politeness of best practice methods textbooks and make teacher education more personal and hopefully more humanizing. I also saw a unique opportunity to address specifically spirit and connection with this group of educators where “community” already existed and where we had taken for granted the need to better support teachers and children of color grappling with racist societal structures.

I started each class session with 2-3 minutes of meditation, guiding students through with common instructions of sitting quietly, with eyes closed, to notice their breath, to feel the new space that they were in, and to note this classroom and the cohort as special, as different from the rest of their days. At first, I couched the practice as akin to the tradition in many Eastern homes where one removes her

shoes in a physical and metaphorical move that notes home as a sacred space. The next week, I shared some of the neurobiology science that documents meditation as a powerful practice for calming down the central nervous system, and we discussed the necessity of this in modern-day screen-saturated lives as well as within contexts where society has deposited the majority of its daily violence: low-income communities of color. There were no readings on the topic; I wanted to have us change our practices to then notice how our habits of mind might also change. In addition to the dedicated moments of meditation, we also practiced discussion approaches where the emphasis was on listening, rather than waiting to talk. For example, in one partner activity, each person shared some of their most basic fears about how they are perceived, and the other person’s response was not to comment but to

The emphasis was on listening, rather than waiting to talk.

repeat what they had heard as important through the first person’s sharing. These kinds of intentional pausing and listening came to mark the ethos of our class. It became clear over the course of the semester that by engaging in a mindful practice that held central the goal to rehumanize ourselves and others, we were creating more space for transformation. As a critical educator and researcher, this felt (felt tactilely, not metaphorically) different from tried and true academic exercises of deconstruction.

Challenges

Below are some themes of affordances and challenges we have discussed from this shared approach to teacher education.

Leigh: What was most beneficial about this unorthodox approach to teacher education?

Dan: The most important contemplative aspect of the class was our unrelenting focus on students’ authentic, dynamic personhoods, as exemplified by Thich Nhat Hanh’s poem “Please Call Me by My True Names” and its phrase “every second I am arriving.” We were really trying to discover students and their educational landscapes for what they are: unmoored from a stable, reductionist description.

Jianan: I believe that being contemplative is one of the most important skills a teacher can acquire. Our generation of teachers, especially ones who get into the field to work in urban schools, are seduced by this methods fetish because it is a safer way to teach. By hoarding “proven” methods, the teacher is able to protect him or herself because that is the way “experts” say we should teach. While I am not saying these methods are not important – they are highly important – it is only half the story. The other half depends on how the teacher is able to see him or herself in the classroom and how they can be open to being vulnerable to their students. I find it ironic that a teacher might be an advocate about climbing up Bloom’s taxonomy of skills (a classification of learning objectives within education), but not give the time of day to being mindful, a skill that I consider to be one of the most difficult higher order cognitive abilities. While the readings were highly effective at probing ourselves as teachers and our beliefs about urban education, I felt the silences in the classroom were critical for me to continue to build my own identity. Starting the class with five minutes of silence allowed me to sit with myself and think about how I was feeling. It then allowed me to sift through my thoughts and emotions and transition into a state of being that would optimally prepare me for class.

Jessica: The applications to a humanistic pedagogy, to me, are obvious. First, instead of unconsciously dehumanizing each other as only teacher-practitioners in a standardized cohort model, we were consciously inter-

rupted in that framework when we were asked to simply listen to each other. Second, the act of simply listening goes against what Kevin Kumashiro (2012) got at when he described the ideological frame Americans have of "the educator"—as someone blathering at the front of the room. Rather, to be vulnerable and listen as a potential educator is to step outside of the frame that the educator is a constant speaker. We were teaching each other—and learning about each other—through silence; through mindful listening.

Kat[harine]: For me, this practice was paramount in the humanizing of the teacher prep process because it served as a weekly reminder of my humanity. Too often last semester I was running on empty but trying to keep going. Those few moments of silence brought me back to my own body where I became conscious of my needs and the energies I had absorbed from my students that day (feelings of excitement, being burdened, stress, etc.). Furthermore, I think this practice has implications in our classrooms. Just as we Donovans enter classrooms thrilled to see each other and very high in energy, our students enter our classrooms in various heightened emotional states. I believe that this practice can serve the same function of bringing them back to their bodies and forming a collective energy level before the beginning of classwork.

We also discussed the challenges of undertaking a mindful practice in a system of schooling, both K-12 and higher education that is modeled after a factory where knowledge is to be deposited into the seemingly empty vessels of students' minds (Freire, 1970). Additionally, we discussed the implicit capitalist structure of society in which education takes place that first has us see ourselves as individuals in competition with each other.

Dan: I was initially sort of afraid that our meditative moments would serve merely as ornamentation to a class that was still successful in its other

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core facets. Luckily, the facilitation you provided was very much meant for an authentic, if expedient, moment of calm self-awareness. Compared to some kooky yoga and Buddhist "churches" I have seen and heard about before, I was glad that the group's silent minutes together were

Education takes place in the implicit capitalistic structure of society.

truly beneficial to our mental states. By extension, they were beneficial for our talk on teaching and our students whom we talked about.

Jessica: The hesitations I have are cosmetic—that administrators and co-teachers in "real world" environments will not "get it" or think I am undermining content teaching, or that mindfulness may become another buzzword

devoid of real meaning in pedagogical literature. That opening a class with meditation may become about as humanistic and rich as writing a "Do Now" on the board—that is to say, yet another mechanistic, rote activity. Of course, this all depends on how the exercise is used. When it does become part of the "methodology grab-bag," of course it is useless—and of course students can and will respond negatively to that perception. When it is carefully facilitated as a response to and support for students, situated within the context and necessity of the school site, of course students can and will respond positively to the reality of the practice.

Jianan: What we do [in teacher education and schools] is normally dehumanizing, built for burnout. This is an anti-burnout practice. But it would be trickier outside of the Donovan group because we buy in to each other. How would it work with random students?

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with a very complex issue that confuses a lot of Americans—that race is symbolized by skin color, but it involves a complex set of meanings that are both placed on and yet go beyond skin color, and that reflect history and inequality between the races. Understanding how that inequality mattered for current issues of race was a constant issue in the class, coming up in a range of contexts—from whether Latinos making fun of a white couple at a Latino dance had the same significance as whites doing the same to a Latino couple at a mostly white dance, to whether a white student’s discomfort in an otherwise all-black class had the same character as a black student’s discomfort in an otherwise all-white class.

We had conversations like this all the time. Students in general are, I think, hungering for a safe and educationally serious space to explore and to engage with one another about racial issues. Many teachers are fearful of venturing into this territory. My students told me they had taken classes in which a racial issue would come up and they felt that their teacher would have liked to keep the discussion going, but, the students said, did not know enough to make that happen. I agree that teachers really do need a solid base of racial knowledge to teach these subjects. But they might also be worried that this material is just too hot to handle, especially in interracial classrooms. But my experience is that the students really want to learn about it, not just go after each other, or worry about being “politically correct.” Secondary students are generally not aware that race is an area of serious study, like chemistry or literature, rather than something you just have experiences and opinions about. I found the students’ openness and interest in this material exhilarating. It brought students together rather than pushing them apart. Many more teachers are capable of providing the educational experience about race students are eager to have.

New on PRRAC’s Website

“Mobility Works” (Inclusive Communities Project, April 2013)

“An Early Assessment of Off-Site Replacement Housing, Relocation Planning and Housing Mobility Counseling in HUD’s Choice Neighborhoods Initiative,” by Martha Galvez (PRRAC, March 2013)

“Increasing Housing Choices: How Can the MTW Program Evolve to Achieve its Statutory Mandate?,” by Sara Oppenheimer, Megan Haberle and Philip Tegeler (PRRAC, March 2013)

“Creating Balance in the Locations of LIHTC Developments: The Role of Qualified Allocation Plans,” by Jill Khadduri (PRRAC & Abt Associates, February 2013)

I think my experience also points up a tremendous lacuna in education reform today. The Civil Rights Project at UCLA has done a terrific job documenting both the increasing racial separation in schools—partly due to judicial retreat from the goal of integration, culminating in the appalling 2007 *Parents Involved* decision—yet the benefits of integration (of both a race and a class character) in reducing racial achievement disparities. Currently popular corporate and market reforms cannot show such clear benefits. But arguments about the achievement gap do not articulate the civic benefits of integrated education. They cast the educational benefits only to the disadvantaged by race and class. But the civic educational benefits accrue to all students. All of them gain from learning to listen and learn from others from different racial, ethnic and class backgrounds, acquiring the skills of engagement across social divisions, experiencing a sense of community that grows from a well-functioning and diverse class. The achievement gap focus misses the vital civic purposes of education, purposes that are themselves also inimical to market and corporate reform.

In 2009, Eric Holder said that America was a nation of cowards regarding “things racial”—that we do not know how to talk about race with one

another. This is exactly right, and schools have a responsibility to make sure the next generation does a better job of it. I saw my course as serving this function in two ways. It taught students a basic racial literacy about the role of race in American history and its legacy in the present. This is not the same as providing policy prescriptions for complicated public racial issues; but it provides a backdrop to those issues without which they cannot be intelligently debated.

This racial literacy can be taught to any classroom demographic—all-white, all-black. (Perhaps a class with a small percentage of students of color in an otherwise white class might be an exception. The hypervisibility of those students might render this particular configuration one to stay away from.) These same-race groups are not homogeneous and the material itself will generate great discussions, and the students will gain important civic knowledge. But learning in a racially mixed setting such as my class was, provides for the development of civic capability in a multiracial democracy that is difficult to achieve in one-race-dominant settings. We have to get integration back on the “reform” agenda. Only with both a basic racial literacy and the capability of engaging across racial lines about racial issues can we meet Holder’s challenge. □

(DIVERSITY: Cont. from page 9)

The increasing interest in school diversity in places like New York City is driven by historic demographic shifts in cities and suburbs and by a growing awareness that the United States will be majority minority within the next 30 years. Although they will not lead the movement, charter schools that value integration over isolated “diversity” can play a supporting role by collaborating with public schools that share the same goal. □

(CIVIC RIGHT: Cont. from page 2)

ticipation in protests, contacting an elected official and so forth, also show vast disparities linked with class, education and race. Middle-class adults are politically active at up to *six times* the rate of low-income adults, whether measured by working for a campaign, serving on the board of an organization, participating in protests, or contacting officials. Broader measures of civic participation—belonging to any group or organization, working on a community problem, volunteering, attending a community meeting, or even just wearing a campaign button or putting a political bumper sticker on one’s car—are also highly unequally distributed by educational attainment and ethnoracial group. For example, college graduates in 2009 reported participating in non-electoral political activities, volunteering with an organization, and working with neighbors to fix a community problem at twice the rate of high school graduates, and four times the rate of high school dropouts. White and multiracial individuals are similarly involved in these activities at twice the rates of Latino and Asian individuals, with African Americans in the middle (Levinson 2012). None of these rates of involvement is particularly high. Since power distributions follow comparative rather than absolute levels of participation, however, these general and persistent inequalities matter even when absolute levels of engagement are low for all groups.

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Furthermore, the sizable gap in individuals’ sense of *efficacy*—their beliefs that they themselves can make a difference and influence others, including those in government—is a major concern. The less efficacious one feels, the less likely one is to partici-

fluencing the character and quality of civic engagement (Kinder 1998).

Why the Civic Empowerment Gap Matters

The civic empowerment gap is therefore no more natural or inevitable than the academic achievement gap is.

pate. Efficacy is also significantly correlated with both race/ethnicity and class (Verba et al. 1995, Table 12.14). This gap is understandable. As a White, well-educated, middle-class woman with extensive political and social capital, for example, I undeniably *do* have more opportunities to influence government or public policy than did my non-White, educationally underserved, economically disadvantaged, often limited English proficient students living in neighborhoods with limited social and political capital (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005; Bartels 2008). But the efficacy gap is also viciously self-reinforcing, if those who correctly view themselves as more able to make a difference get ever more involved, while those who question their efficacy withdraw from public civic engagement. Similar concerns beset disparities in civic identity and civic duty, which figure importantly in in-

Although these civic empowerment gaps are common knowledge, they tend to be explained away in the same way the academic achievement gap was a decade ago: “But of course poor people [or Hispanics, etc.] participate less. They don’t have the time or financial resources (or education, knowledge, ...) to participate as wealthier people do.” Such arguments are as inimical to democracy as were those arguments justifying the academic achievement gap. They also make little sense when examined on a global scale. Consider the millions of courageous protesters, many from distinctly lower-class communities, who have participated in the “Arab Spring” uprisings. Or examine voter turn-out rates internationally, which reveal about a 10 percentage point difference between the most- and least-educated citizens and between the wealthiest and poorest citizens. This is far eclipsed by the United States’ 25-35 percentage point gap (Lijphart 1997, 3; Jaime-Castillo 2009). It is also important to recognize that the participation gap has not even always been a major feature of U.S. civic and political life. In the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, immigrant incorporation groups, trade unions, fraternal organizations, and

political parties regularly mobilized poor, working-class, non-White and newly immigrant Americans, and participation in civic organizations especially was extremely widespread (Montgomery 1993, 2001; Skocpol 1999; Skocpol, et al. 2000).

The civic empowerment gap is therefore no more natural or inevitable than the academic achievement gap is. Virtually all Americans now accept (in theory, at least) that we have a national responsibility to provide adequate academic education to all children, and we claim (in theory, at least) that all children can achieve academically. We must reach the same conclusions about our nation's, and hence every school's, obligation to help all children achieve civic empowerment. Public schools were founded in the United States for civic purposes. We must hold schools to account—and hold *ourselves* to account—for achieving civic outcomes for all children that are as high quality as the academic outcomes we now claim to expect.

Democratic governance relies on participatory citizens for its legitimacy and stability. Furthermore, democratic deliberations and decisions are likely to be of lower quality if people representing only a fairly narrow range of experiences, interests and backgrounds are involved. Part of the beauty of democracy, when it functions effectively and inclusively, is its ability to create aggregate wisdom and good judgment from individual citizens' necessarily limited knowledge, skills and viewpoints. To exclude citizens from this process is to diminish the wisdom that the collectivity may create.

What Should Be Done

One important battleground for attacking the civic empowerment gap is the network of mostly urban schools serving a *de facto* segregated, poor and minority student population. To start with, we need to commit to improving urban schools and reducing the dropout rate, which reaches nearly fifty percent in some urban districts. If urban schools were better, and if more stu-

Reader Comment

It was refreshing to see the essay by LeeAnn Hall and Danny HoSang in the March/April issue of *Poverty & Race*. The tradition promoted by Saul Alinsky feeds into and builds on a deeply imbedded cultural/political pragmatism in North America. Too many community movements mimic the deal-making that characterizes the bankrupt system of planning and decisionmaking when they start out by limiting their objectives to the realisable short-term deal with a developer or government body. It leads to the constant lowering of expectations. In principle, there's nothing wrong with making deals or concessions, but when such tactics become strategies, they leave communities without strategies. Narrow, pragmatic organizing that explicitly evades discussion and debate about fundamental issues of class and race casts a shadow over those who are organizing for deeper changes. Community organizers who go for deeper change beyond the token community benefits thrown around by deep-pocketed developers and dealing politicians are automatically dismissed as utopians and dreamers or, worse, too radical to engage in dialogue. Here in New York, a well-worn phrase I hear from politicians and activists across the political spectrum is "I agree with you but it ain't gonna happen," which really means they won't even talk about anything but cutting a deal. Occupy Wall Street struck a deep chord in U.S. society because it tapped in to a well of dissatisfaction with the bankrupt system—monopoly capitalism—in which everything has a price and the next deal is around the corner.

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dents stayed in higher-quality schools and graduated, then the demographic divide in this country would narrow, and the civic empowerment gap would narrow along with it.

We also need to restore civic education to the curriculum. The decline in the number, range and frequency of civics courses offered in US elementary and high schools must be reversed. There is ample evidence that civic education improves civic outcomes, but resources devoted to it have dropped markedly over the past thirty or forty years—especially in schools serving minority students. This approach makes no sense. Consider that we require students to take English and math every semester of every year of elementary and secondary school because mastery takes time and practice. If we want students to become masterful citizens, then the same expectations should apply. Civic education must begin in elementary schools and be a regular part of edu-

cation K-12 and beyond.

Old-school "civics," however, isn't going to shrink the civic empowerment gap on its own. Civics is usually taken to cover the three branches of government, "how a bill becomes a law," and other formal institutional structures demonstrating how government works. Many students and others at the "bottom" of the civic empowerment gap, however, think that government *doesn't* work—at least for them or anyone they know—and they may well be justified in this belief. Civics classes that emphasize the mechanisms of a functional and essentially fair and democratic system will thus be rejected as irrelevant or worse by those to whom educators are most responsible for helping to empower. So we need to take another approach. *Schools need to take seriously the knowledge and experiences of low-income youth and adults of color—to teach in ways that are con-*

(Please turn to page 12)

sonant with and that even build upon their knowledge and experience—while doing so in a way that is engaging and empowering rather than disaffecting and disempowering.

One important way to do this is by teaching historical counternarratives instead of the moderately triumphalist narrative about U.S. history taught in most schools. Students are often exhorted to “get involved” because of how great the country is and how pure are its ideals. Instead, students can learn about the collective struggles that millions of Americans have engaged in to create opportunities for others. It then becomes students’ obligation to take on this mantle of struggle in order to consolidate these hard-won gains and to open further opportunities to others. This kind of teaching requires a shift from extraordinary heroes, whether Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, to ordinary role models. To the extent that students learn to gaze upon others’ heroic visages, they fail to learn and be moved to engage civically themselves. Education for civic empowerment necessitates a shift in focus from distant heroes and their accomplishments to more ordinary role models and their specific techniques of civic engagement, especially of collective action.

At the same time as we change how students learn about citizenship in settings such as history class, we must also change students’ opportunities to learn through citizenship in the school as a whole. Schools are themselves civil societies, for good and ill; as such, they exert a profound effect on students’ and adults’ civic experiences, identities and opportunities—even when they have no intention of doing so. If we want young people to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and habits of empowered citizens, they must be given the opportunity on a regular basis to practice being citizens. Such opportunities are shockingly rare especially in urban schools serving predominantly low-income students of color. Civic disrespect, compelled silence and zero tolerance policies for

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any perceived deviance are often the order of the day. But classrooms and schools can be reformed, so that an open, mutually respectful culture and climate is established in which students feel not only free but even expected to speak up and share their perspectives on important matters affecting the

school, local, regional and even global community.

Perhaps most importantly, adults, other elites and youth themselves will come to recognize and value the civic contributions that young people—especially low-income youth of color—can make only when these young people

are given the opportunities to make a visible and effective difference in the world beyond the school. “Action civics” enables students to do civics and behave as citizens by engaging in a cycle of research, action and reflection about problems they care about personally while learning about deeper principles of effective civic and especially political action. Organizations around the country are partnering with urban schools and districts to provide students such opportunities, including Mikva Challenge, Public Achievement, Generation Citizen, Youth on Board, and Earth Force. These initiatives are also supported by the National Action Civics Collaborative, which is beginning to train additional teachers, policy makers, and district leaders in action civics.

Moving Forward

Public schools have always been charged with the responsibility of making Americans, and hence, of (re)making America. The decisions we make about how to educate our and

others’ children are at their heart decisions about how we conceive of the world we live in now and how to create the world we want to inhabit in the future. I argue that solving the civic empowerment gap is a central responsibility of schools (and other public institutions); it is a necessary precondition of our claim to be a democratic nation. But the task is not without danger. It risks exposing fissures in our national identity and democracy that many people would rather keep under wraps. It also risks upending our collective understanding of who we are, both empirically and aspirationally—including by revealing that no such collective understanding exists. We must confront these risks clear-headedly and honestly if schools are truly to tackle the civic empowerment gap in a meaningful way.

Notwithstanding both the challenges and even the dangers, the pursuit of democratic equality and legitimacy is a laudable and necessary goal. As schools put these reforms into place, they will provide students and teachers with a set of powerful civic experiences that are likely to increase their

efficacy and engagement, and hence to inspire their acquisition of civic knowledge and skills as well as continued productive participation. In doing so, schools will also help strengthen local communities and the nation as a whole, both via the direct work that students accomplish and by building a new generation of mobilized, empowered adults.

Reducing the civic empowerment gap also strengthens democracy. It broadens government’s representativeness, increases its responsiveness to diverse individuals and communities, and thereby also reinforces its political legitimacy in the eyes of historically disenfranchised community members. It strengthens schools, as students turn their attention to solving problems collaboratively as opposed to fighting against the system or just checking out. And finally, it promotes civic and political equality and fairness—ideals that are central to our American democracy. These are goals that all schools—and all citizens—can and should embrace. □

(*MINDFULNESS: Cont. from page 7*)

It would need more of a data/science explanation front-ended and may be a longer process to build buy-in in the group.

Kat: I’m a yoga and meditation practitioner. And, even for me, initially, there was a little of me that felt a little angry for the sake of being resistant. [laughing] I’m not sure why that came out of me. I was frustrated perhaps that a lot of the stuff in [the social context of education class] was an overlap from undergrad and there wasn’t any time to focus on what do we do with that. So I thought, alright! Here’s a literacy course, here we go with methods. And then, oh my gosh, here we go again with schools and society and racism. But then, with the practices of meditation and truly listening, we started to articulate voices of dissensions, democratic discourse,

and it wasn’t combative for the sake of it, but deepening the conversations. I could see the transformation in myself from one extreme to the other. There was something in the process of community-building that was transformative.

Dan: We came in looking for something very specific. We came out with teflon minds, able to let the distractions of separation slide off of us.

The way forward is both together and mindful.

Although it was not in the explicit design, the practices of meditation and being intentional with each other started to chip away at one of the core requirements of an oppressive society: that we are separate and in competition with each other. The Donovan cohort and all of the authors of this article represent a variety of standpoints in society: young adult, middle-

aged, white, people of color, varying sexual identities, varying abled, etc. What the method of being mindful afforded us was a chance to touch stone to our core humanity, to be in our bodies and to be present so that we could engage more wholeheartedly in our collective learning. We also share these practices with some trepidation, particularly to the field of education, which knows how to homogenize and flatten almost any vibrant practice. In a sense, schools come by this honestly, as they are modeled after factories. In the desire to “scale up,” though, we have to remain vigilant about not reducing and removing the human element to teaching. At its core, teaching and learning as well as social movements are relational activities. Perhaps the only proven method for being in a generative relationship for the social good is to be mindfully human and humanizing. □