

Teaching Tolerance

‘I Don’t Think I’m Biased’

[Number 37: Spring 2010](#)

Multicultural understanding and proficiency have never been more important to teachers than they are right now. Never before have we had so many young children entering schools populated by teachers who reflect neither their race, nor their language tradition, nor the communities from which they come. This growth in culturally diverse classrooms has unfortunately coincided with an “achievement gap” of historical proportions.

In our work as teacher educators over the years, we have carefully watched and listened as pre-service and practicing teachers struggled with their own understandings of diversity — and consciousness of their own racial, ethnic and class identities and how these identities affect their teaching. While white students are often confronting these identities seriously for the first time when they reach our classroom, this is work that all teachers need to do in order to reach their students effectively.

With few exceptions, the process of becoming competent in multicultural discourse is advanced by an initial event or “encounter” that challenges individuals to reconsider their beliefs and attitudes. The encounter, according to Gay, is “an experience or event that shatters a person’s current feelings... It may be real or vicarious, personal or social, verbal or visual.” The design and provision of such encounters is a decisive component of our diversity work.

While some of the most powerful encounter experiences involve immersion in a different culture, these experiences are not always available or accessible. Because of this, we have worked to identify encounter experiences that can occur within the walls of university classrooms or schools — and have found that many of these encounters can elicit similar outcomes.

The Teaching Diverse Students Initiative (TDSi), now available at www.tolerance.org/tdsi, includes a number of resources to help create an encounter experience. The section on “Understanding the Influence of Race” includes tools to help teachers examine their own biases and think critically about what “race” really means.

Another encounter experience that we use can be found at the website for the Public Broadcasting Service television series “[Race: the Power of an Illusion](#).” The “Sorting People” exercise asks participants to categorize individuals into racial/ethnic groups based solely on their visual appearance. Participants’ error scores ease the transition into a dialogue about race as a social construct. The website provides support materials and other experiences to help students further explore this content.

We have also used more traditional means to provide opportunities for teachers to examine beliefs, attitudes and biases. One of the most powerful readings for our predominantly white,

female students is Peggy McIntosh's 1999 article, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. Most of these students are unaware of the privileges they receive just by being born white in the United States and are startled to read this article. We often accompany it with another article, *White Privilege in Schools*, by Ruth Anne Olson (1999). These two articles examine racism on a systemic level and challenge students to consider the perpetuation of injustice on a larger, more daunting scale.

The experiences presented above encourage reflection in novel ways. We have found that individuals exhibit a range of responses when confronted with the potential of personal bias, and that these responses present important scaffolding opportunities for teacher educators. In the following sections, typical responses are detailed, along with strategies to facilitate processing and further engagement.

Dismissal

"None of this is true; the author obviously has a political agenda."

When individuals are presented with information or experiences that challenge their beliefs, one possible response is to reject the source. Taking the stance that "it's simply not true" can end the conversation quickly. This can be a convenient strategy to avoid the potentially painful process of reflecting on hidden bias.

One of the least effective strategies we have found in addressing this response is trying to convince the individual of the accuracy of the source. Approaching bias in a "hard sell" fashion is rarely palatable, and resistance will likely increase. By allowing individuals time to explore a variety of information on bias and listen as peers discuss the issues, we can provide a cooling-off period. Afterward, individuals may be more inclined to consider the potential of personal bias. We can then employ many of the strategies listed below.

Disbelief

"I don't think that I can really be biased. I grew up in a diverse neighborhood, and I have a lot of friends who are African American." or "I didn't grow up privileged. My family didn't have a lot of money, and we worked for everything we got."

An equally common response is the disbelief that individuals experience when they encounter information that is incompatible with how they perceive their beliefs and practices. Teachers view themselves as "good" and "fair" people, and they are skeptical about being biased. They are typically eager to cling to the comfort of their perceived neutrality on such issues, which again can provide a roadblock to productive dialogue and reflection.

To address this response, we encourage teachers to consider how they were socialized as children. Many are quick to report that individuals in their family had racist attitudes, which they actively reject, but which may have played a part in the associations that are part of their subconscious. At this point, we share excerpts from films such as *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (Sun, 2001), which examines how the "other" is portrayed in Disney films. In addition, we show the

short documentary *A Girl Like Me* (Davis, 2006), where young African American girls recount their issues with race, and repeat the historic experiment asking children to choose the doll they want for a friend. As teachers watch young African American children consistently select the white doll, their eyes are opened to considering how such associations develop for children at a very young age. These experiences elicit rich dialogue about how associations may develop under our radar and, when unchallenged, potentially become ingrained.

Acceptance

“It makes sense to me that I am biased, because I am white and I grew up only around white people.” or “I do think I have received privileges because of being white, but that is how things are. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

When teachers read articles about white privilege, we find that many accept bias and privilege as realities in their lives. While individuals express regret, they indicate that they are not surprised, having relatively little exposure to diversity as a child, and working in a homogenous, majority setting. This line of reasoning rationalizes their bias and sense of privilege. They see bias and privilege as societal issues, rather than personal ones, and this allows them to avoid taking responsibility for their attitudes and biases.

The teachers with whom we work accept the societal factors that have contributed to bias but don’t see their inaction as contributing to the problem. At this point, we use readings from Tatum’s (2003) book, which provides the example of the moving sidewalk at the airport as analogous to racism in America. Her metaphor — of standing still while the walkway moves forward — shows how failure to challenge prevalent systems can unintentionally perpetuate injustice. This visual illustration effectively resonates with teachers as they consider their prior acceptance as problematic.

Discomfort

“Much of this is surprising to me as well as embarrassing. I am mortified by the fact that I have taken issues of privilege for granted that people of color struggle with on a daily basis.” or “I have always been proud of being color blind and treating people fairly ... now I’m wondering if I was being unfair.”

Discomfort is another common reaction to becoming aware of bias. Teachers are frequently distressed by what this might mean for their life and work. In this case, we usually reassure teachers that the first step to addressing their biases is to acknowledge them. We note that everyone has hidden biases, but that these are most dangerous when they are unrecognized. One of the resources that we refer to is the movie, *Crash*, which shows the devastating effects of overt and hidden bias.

Discomfort can manifest itself in other ways as well. Some teachers with whom we work frequently hold great pride in their pronouncement of being actively “color blind” when it comes to their students. They view this as an expression of their lack of bias, and it can be difficult to readjust this thinking. A powerful reading that we provide at this point is *I Don’t Think of You as*

Black, a series of written correspondences between Naomi Tutu and her friend, Rose Bator. This reading helps teachers recognize the impact that race has in all our lives, but particularly for people of color in the United States.

When teachers express discomfort, we encourage them to explore ways to take action to combat stereotyping and discrimination. We suggest examining materials in classrooms for racism and sexism, addressing and eliminating racist language, and examining school policies and practices that discriminate against particular groups of students. We encourage teachers to incorporate diversity into their classrooms in authentic ways in order to combat societal bias. Derman Sparks, Ramsey and Edwards provide teachers with some concrete strategies to begin to address such issues, even in environments where little diversity exists.

Disclosure

“Everything I am experiencing shows me that I have strong preference for African American individuals. I interpret this as a distrust of white people, which is unfortunately true.”

A less common response is when individuals actually disclose a conscious bias. This differs from the *acceptance* response, where an acknowledgment of a hidden bias is recognized. This response is characterized by an open admission of prejudice — a step beyond acceptance. This confession requires a great deal of honesty and courage and can be disquieting to divulge.

Although there is the potential for this response to elicit alarm, our experiences indicate a level of self-awareness that differentiates these respondents from others. Individuals who disclose personal bias frequently express how hard they work to intentionally focus on others’ abilities, without regard to race. Their consciousness of prejudice guides their active attention to guard against a translation of attitude to practice. They generally recognize the historical and contemporary roots of their prejudice, and they frequently articulate anger toward a society that perpetuates racism.

We find it critical to actively support teachers who have made this proclamation. The consequences of slavery and colonialism are decidedly visible in our society, and individuals’ experiences with racism are real and must be validated. As individuals confront the realities of racism, their awareness is critical in making conscious decisions about themselves, others and their role in affecting change.

Conclusion

As teacher educators, we continue to challenge ourselves to provide varied opportunities for teachers as they engage in the exploration of education for social justice. This work is not achieved without challenge. As we present pre-service and practicing teachers with new ideology and experience, we also must acknowledge ourselves as cultural beings continuously encountering and interpreting ideas and interactions. This process of continuous mindfulness and self-examination seats us as co-learners, with each discourse providing opportunity for illumination.

We find it important to remind ourselves, and the teachers with whom we work, that the process of addressing personal bias isn't about reaching a destination. According to B.J Cahill and E.M. Adams, "No one ever arrives; they just bring more of themselves through each time." As we open our heads and hearts to new understandings through the invitation of persistent experience and inquiry, we embrace the journey.

[Contact us](#) with your comments.

-  [Printer-friendly version](#)

You might also like:

- [Test Yourself for Hidden Bias](#)
- [White Teachers at the Crossroads](#)
- [Color Lines](#)
- [White Anti-Racism: Living the Legacy](#)
- ['The Capacity for Connection'](#)

Author Information

[Pat Clark](#)

Dr. Pat Clark is an Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education in the Department of Elementary Education at Ball State University in Muncie, IN.

[Read the full bio](#)

Order Free Materials

Teaching Tolerance kits and magazine subscriptions are free to educators. Order our materials [using this form](#).

Subscribe to Enews

Sign up today and receive the latest on anti-bias education issues. Enter your email address:

Subscribe

Perspective: Number 37: Spring 2010

How We Live Our Lives

The great promise of the 1954 landmark U. S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was that children would grow up together in integrated schools. They would prove the segregationists wrong. Black children and white children would learn to respect one another as equals and bring down the walls of racial separation. Through the efforts of our children, our nation would live up to the ideals of equality and justice for all.

Feature Articles in Number 37: Spring 2010

Reason, Purpose & Triumph

Part of the Why I Teach essay series.

Toward a More Civil Discourse

New curriculum offers step-by-step lessons for engaging in effective argument on divisive issues.

The Only One

Where schools are still separate and unequal, parents often look beyond their local school for solutions. But when you're the only person of color in your class, school can become a struggle between two worlds.

Into the Mainstream

In third grade, Julia Horsman's entire science project consisted of being herded outside with the other kids with disabilities and rolling soda cans down a ramp, some empty, some full, to see which would travel farther and faster.

Gender Segregation: Separate But Effective?

Gender-segregated classrooms are on the rise in the U.S. — especially the Southeast — but research regarding their effectiveness remains inconclusive.

Unmaking Brown

America's schools are more segregated now than they were in the late 1960s. More than 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, we need to radically rethink the meaning of "school choice."

Uncovering the Movement

By letting students 'do' history for themselves

'Homo High'

Some people argue “gay-friendly” schools offer needless segregation.

Others say they’re the only chance some kids have to make it.

Immigrant Charter Schools: A Better Choice?

Charter schools tailored to the needs of newly arrived immigrants are getting a lot of attention. But are they working? And will they lead to a new kind of segregation?

Check the Labels

A simple writing assignment sharpens students’ minds — and challenges their biases.

Whose Student is She?

No Child Left Behind is plunging many English language learners into the educational mainstream — and sometimes getting them in over their heads. Teacher collaboration may help such students stay afloat.

'I Don't Think I'm Biased'

‘Encounter experiences’ help pre-service and practicing teachers confront their attitudes about race and privilege.

Beyond the Barbed Wire

Story Corner

[About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) [Privacy Information](#)