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# Making a Difference: How Teachers Can Positively Affect Racial Identity and Acceptance in America

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**ABSTRACT.** The author examines the important role schools, teachers, and the high school social studies classroom can play in helping students develop positive racial identities. Using the Classroom-based Multicultural Democratic Education framework, the author argues that high school social studies teachers need to adapt pedagogical strategies and curricula to foster racial tolerance, understanding, and respect within the classroom and for individual students. This is necessary training to prepare students for life in a racially strained American society. Teachers can help students achieve a positive racial identity by (1) understanding students' racial and cultural backgrounds, (2) providing students with a more diverse, multicultural curriculum, and (3) generating cooperative learning between students. The author offers suggestions for achieving this goal and urges teachers and scholars to conduct further research in this area.

**Keywords:** Classroom-based Multicultural Democratic Education framework.

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The construction of race in America has greatly affected the country's history. Since Africans were chosen to be slaves in America, replacing white, European indentured servants, skin color has been used to physically separate people. As a result, race became "the basis for treating people differentially" (Appiah 1996). Slavery led to a set of racial divides, yielding a ubiquitous legacy of racism that shapes perceptions of, and interactions among, American citizens. Within this system exists an inherent power hierarchy: the color of one's skin dictates one's access to basic rights, resources, education, expectations, and social privileges (Orfield and Lee 2005). Therefore, the power dynamics of racism profoundly shape the relationship between races and individual racial identity construction.

Race is a difficult and volatile topic to discuss in the classroom, partly because, as Michael Ormi and Howard Winant (1986) argue, race is a sociohistorical concept that has been defined by a rigidly enforced color line. They write, "Race has been a profound determinant of one's political rights, one's location in the labor market, and indeed one's

sense of identity" (1). In this article, I explain methods and strategies teachers can use to acknowledge and address race productively in their classrooms. I argue that high school social studies teachers need to adapt their teaching methods and curricula to help develop students' racial identity and foster racial acceptance, tolerance, and interaction. I substantiate this argument by examining why the exploration of racial identity is significant within the Classroom-based Multicultural Democratic Education framework (CMDE) established by Anand Marri (2005a) and show how the social studies classroom is an ideal place for such inquiry. I also discuss how students' racial identities affect interpersonal dynamics within classrooms and schools. I propose pedagogical strategies and curricular changes teachers can implement to develop positive acceptance of racial differences and racial identity in students.

## Why Racial Identity Should Be Taught in High School Social Studies

Schools are an ideal place for students to grapple with and explore their racial identities. Amanda Baron-Fritts (2004) found that the identity of students of color is greatly connected to

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their experiences in school. For both students of color and white students, schools are a controlled environment that can allow them to explore topics of race and identity without being affected by stereotypical roles that exist outside school. Schools function as laboratories for teaching students how to act and interact with people of other races—training for the real world.

During extracurricular school activities and in their neighborhoods, many students self-segregate and do not challenge themselves to learn about other cultures. In the classroom, students can be forced to confront issues of race, culture, and self-segregation. Teachers can mold curricula and inform students of positive aspects of their culture and other cultures; once this occurs, students will gain a historical and social context helpful in discussing and facing racial issues.

Moreover, positive racial identities produce academic achievement among black youth (Steward et al. 2002). These findings illustrate that if teachers and schools focus on creating positive racial identities in their students, the students will be more likely to succeed academically and interact well with people of other races and cultures.

Within the school environment, the most effective place to develop racial identity is the high school social studies classroom. The exploration of race and identity is a complex endeavor that requires critical-thinking skills. In his writing about the stages of cognitive development, Jean Piaget notes that youth do not become formally operational until they are between the ages of twelve and nineteen years old (Cole, Cole, and Lightfoot 2005). At this stage, adolescents “acquire the ability to think systematically about all logical relations within a problem . . . [and] display keen interest in abstract ideas and in the process of thinking itself” (459). Therefore, many adolescents are not prepared to discuss complex ideas such as race until they enter middle school, and most adolescents are not ready until they reach high school. Furthermore, according to Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy, it is not until high school that students have

the cognitive ability to move beyond a concrete knowledge base and begin to enhance their critical-thinking skills (Freese 1998). Consequently, to maximize the positive effect teachers can have on racial identity, high schools are the ideal place for students to embark on this process.

Second, the purpose of a social studies classroom is to allow students to study the past to inform their present and future. However, students need to be prepared to participate in and negotiate today’s racially tense democracy. One method used to address the problem of racism in the social studies classroom is adopting and teaching about multicultural democracy. Marri (2005a) fused the two fields of democratic and multicultural education to create the CMDE framework “to prepare a thoughtful, active, and effective citizenry” (1036). The CMDE framework has three elements: “critical pedagogy, building of community, and thorough disciplinary content” (Marri 2003, 260). This approach incorporates the ideas of James Banks (2002), who believes that acquaintance and understanding can lead to respect. Marri (2005a) builds on Banks’s model, seeing the social studies classroom as a place to build a community where students can develop positive relationships, learn to resolve conflicts, and operate within an environment of mutual respect.

According to Amy Gutmann (1995), mutual respect is “the equal standing of every person as an individual and citizen, and it also enables democratic citizens to discuss their political differences in a productive way by first understanding one another’s perspectives and then by trying to find fair ways of resolving their disagreements” (4). Establishing a classroom based on multicultural democracy and mutual respect provides students with an avenue through which they can examine and develop their racial identities.

The widespread study of racial identity dates back to the 1960s, when many black and white scholars strived to create and codify a theoretical and empirical model of blacks moving from one identity stage to another (Cross 1994).

William E. Cross Jr. created such a model in racial identity development (RID), a controversial theory that scholars created to explain blacks’ and whites’ progression of racial identity from lack of awareness of racism and racial issues to race consciousness. RID also implies growing levels of commitment to combating racial problems entrenched in society.

Many factors affect a person’s RID, including geographical location, religious beliefs, and the composition of the neighborhood in which a person lives—social, economic, and political conditions (Thompson, Sanders, and Akbar 2003; Wilson 1996). For example, living in isolation in cities and rural areas, people of color do not gain the benefits of integrated studies and interaction. Orfield and Lee (2004) write, “Only when students are exposed to sustained desegregated experiences will they lead more integrated lives as adults” (24). The social studies classroom provides a place where students, independent of where they have grown up, can create positive racial identities and learn the tools necessary to succeed as democratic citizens in a multicultural United States.

### How Racial Identity Affects Dynamics in Schools

The potential for conflict always exists in schools, but conflict between races is particularly challenging. One reason conflict arises between racial groups is that blacks and whites typically are at different stages of RID. For example, “African Americans [in one stage] might be accepting of the majority culture’s norms while rejecting their own group, whereas African Americans in [another stage] might immerse themselves within their own culture while rejecting many aspects of the majority culture” (Zaff et al. 2002, 767).

Another reason for racial conflict is peer influence, an integral part of adolescent development that also contributes to how students feel about race. Students want to fit in, and in high school it is easiest to fit in with similar students (Wade and Okesola 2002).

According to Margaret O'Dougherty Wright and Linh-Nguyen Littleford (2002), this grouping of students on the basis of race is a result of students experiencing racial prejudice and exclusion. Students then create an accepting community within their own racial and ethnic groups (Tatum 1997). If nothing is done to stop this racial isolation, students will perpetuate the negative racial assumptions and beliefs that currently exist in the United States.

All students need to question why they have the feelings they have about race. They can begin by writing about or sharing their stereotypical perceptions of their own race and others. From there, students can attempt to dispel these stereotypes by discussing why they exist and how they can overcome them. Students can begin this exploration in the classroom through dialogue; then, outside the classroom, they can start to break down their racial isolation and tensions. However, a more complicated question is how teachers can adapt pedagogy and curricula to address these racial problems.

### **Pedagogical Strategies for Teaching Racial Identity and Acceptance**

Many methods of adapting pedagogy and curricula can help students learn about multicultural democracy and develop more positive racial identities. Using the CMDE framework as a jumping-off point, teachers can begin by understanding the racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds of their students. By doing this, teachers can gauge students' comfort with the topic of race, how open they are to learning about other races, and to what degree the students have been exposed to issues of race and multiculturalism.

Teachers can learn about their students' racial and cultural identities by asking student-centered questions that apply what is being taught in class to the students' lives. This could occur in the form of a "Do Now" or "Get Started" activity, or it could be integrated into the body of a lesson. An example would be if the class was studying the Holocaust and the teacher posed the "Do

Now" question, "To whom do you have the most allegiance?" Such a question would elicit responses from students about the people for whom they care most and the people to whom they do not have allegiance. From there, the teacher can develop the topic by asking, "Why do you have allegiance to certain people versus others?" Such a question can help the teacher learn how his or her students view their place in the world, an important starting position for any discussion on race.

Teachers can also assign activities at the beginning of the year to help students become acquainted with each other. One such assignment is for each student to write two pages about a life experience that defines them. Students would then share the story (abridged or not) with the class, and each student could come away from the activity with an anecdote from each of their peers that helps define them. An example of a group activity is a bingo game where each bingo square is filled with an interesting fact (e.g., "I have left the country" or "I am an only child"). Students walk around the classroom with the bingo sheets and ask peers if any of the boxes apply to them. Each student can sign only one box for each of the other students, and the goal is for the students to fill a row on the bingo card. These activities are fairly stress-free and help students feel comfortable with each other. Comfort is the most important ingredient in an honest, successful discussion about difficult topics such as race.

Next, teachers can assign reflective pieces that allow students to apply their present understanding of race and culture to historical events. For example, if a class were studying the American Revolution, at the end of the unit, the teacher could assign a reflective essay asking students to place themselves (their gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc.) in the time of the American Revolution and state if they would have supported the Revolution and why. The teacher can set aside a day or two for students to research this question in the computer lab or library to guide them through the tasks of grappling with aspects of their identity and placing it in a historical context.

Teachers can help students place their racial beliefs in a historical context by providing them with materials that examine history through multiple lenses. To select such materials, a teacher should research the backgrounds of his or her students. Understanding where one's students come from, especially if the class is diverse, will make the teacher more credible when asking students to examine materials from multiple lenses. In addition, selecting lenses based on the student population (e.g., female, African American, working class) will make the material more meaningful. When students feel that their teacher is knowledgeable about many cultures, including their own, they are more willing to explore their peers' cultures.

The next strategy teachers can use to effect positive change in their students' racial identities is to infuse controversial issues into the classroom in the context of the CMDE framework. To accomplish this, teachers need to create a classroom environment that is safe for students to talk about issues such as race. This task can be a difficult even for experienced teachers. The most effective way to accomplish it is to create a democratic classroom in which each student has an equal opportunity to succeed, talk, and participate (Banks 2002). The teacher can do this by starting the year with a declaration that the classroom is a place for respect, after which he or she must follow through with that statement by consistently maintaining democracy and respect in the classroom. Such consistency is difficult, but essential in maintaining a safe and healthy environment.

Teaching controversial issues can open students' eyes to perspectives on race and cultures to which they have not previously been exposed. Deborah Meier (2002) found that, when engaged in a controversial (even offensive) conversation in her class, "examining the reasons why they were offensive led to an expansion of my knowledge of history and culture—an opening to new thoughts, not a closing of my mind on old ones" (84). New ideas, even those that may have been in opposition to what students had previously believed, can only help students. As one of my students told me as he referred to a

political discussion about the presidential candidates in 2004, "How can I support or have hatred for a person and their policies about which I know nothing? When I ask my friends why they are voting for the other guy, I want them to give me reasons; voters need to be informed to make the best choice, even when that means learning about ideas and concepts that you might initially want to avoid."

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It is important for teachers to promote the sharing of ideas, even if some may seem a bit "out there." Teaching controversial issues has many positive results for students, such as increased civic competence, heightened understanding of democratic values, deeper engagement in political life, better understanding of the context of the content, and stronger critical thinking and interpersonal skills (Hess 2002; Kelly 1989). Controversy gets students engaged and actively participating in class, as opposed to more passive learning.

Media, including film, can be a powerful tool to introduce controversy into the classroom (Marcus 2005). Because media are a critical part of every student's life, popular movies that address salient, controversial cultural topics can be an entry point for students into a discussion of the events in the movie. For example, when teaching about slavery, teachers could show the clip from the movie *Barbershop* in which two characters debate whether African American citizens should receive reparations for what they suffered as a race throughout slavery and segregation. This controversial clip can ignite a conversation about the legacy of slavery and segregation and the effects that something such as reparations would have on racism. According to Alan Marcus, in reference to bringing the movie *Fahrenheit 9/11* into the

classroom, "Ignoring the film's existence as cultural events and lightning rods for controversy would be akin to disregarding the presidential election that concurrently dominated the airwaves and print media over the past year" (62).

Another form of technology that can assist teachers with applying the CMDE framework is the Internet. The Internet is an easy, low-cost way to access

information, and it makes teachers' task of finding and using documents from multiple perspectives easier (Marri 2003). Through the Internet, teachers have access to lesson plans, academic articles, and historical primary and secondary documents. Marri (2005b) describes a teacher who used the Internet in teaching a unit on the Civil Rights movement: "He presented viewpoints from both Whites and African-Americans while studying both the events surrounding the 1964 murder of civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and desegregation" (402).

Like this teacher, teachers can use a multicultural curriculum to promote positive intergroup relations and understanding. A first step in integrating multicultural materials into the curriculum is to ensure that the material presented is accurate (Romo 1997). If teachers provide accurate information about racial and ethnic groups, rather than stereotypes, students will be able to disregard many of the false understandings they have. Often stereotypes are perpetuated because these myths are all that people within a race know; they have had no contact with any people or ideas that oppose what they have been taught. Even in desegregated schools, if children of all cultural and racial backgrounds are taught only Eurocentric curriculum, the students of color

regress (Foster 1997). Teachers need to be aware that not teaching about and stereotyping students of color can have damaging classroom consequences:

- creating low educational and occupational expectations for students of color
- placing students of color in separate schools and in separate classrooms within schools
- remediating the curriculum and pedagogy for students of color
- expecting students of color to one day occupy lower status and levels of occupations. (Solorzano and Yasso 2001)

Therefore, finding accurate information that provides a positive image of various racial and ethnic groups (Banks 2002) is an essential first step in dismantling stereotypes because, as Tatum states, "Too often they don't see themselves reflected in the curriculum" (O'Neal 1997-8, 14).

However, teachers need to ensure that when they provide accurate information, they do it in a balanced way; materials should be evenly dispersed among all races studied. Moreover, teachers should use diverse educational materials such as "films, plays, biographies, novels, and other ways of presenting members of all groups in a respectful way" (Romo 1997, 4; Banks 2002). With a balance of subject matter and instructional materials, students will ideally respect each new culture and view them as equally valid.

Another part of telling the truth about racial cultures is to be realistic about American racial hegemony. Teachers need to address the "history of systematic racial oppression" (O'Keefe 1994, 9) so white students understand that racism is a present-day reality for people of color, and that the Civil Rights movement did not eradicate racism, but forced it from being an overt action to a more subtle aspect of society. Furthermore, if teachers establish that racism is still a problem needing to be addressed, students will be challenged to think about their own interactions and experiences with racism. This will foster positive discussions about race. Michele Foster (1997) describes a new

teacher who did not understand oppression and phrases such as *institutional racism* until he entered high school. As a teacher, he focuses on issues left out of his own education and says to his third-grade students: "Let's look at this critically. Let's look at this from a different perspective" (178).

An example of how a teacher could integrate material into the curriculum that is realistic about American racial hegemony would be, when studying Reconstruction, to focus not only on the African American experience after emancipation and how they acquired their natural rights, but also what power hierarchy was in place that continued to allow white people to maintain their power over African American citizens. Furthermore, when looking at America during World War II, a teacher could examine Japanese internment and what racial relationships and power dynamics existed among whites, Asian Americans, and other minority groups that permitted internment to occur.

Another curricular technique that addresses racism is examining comparative examples of global racism (e.g., apartheid-era South Africa) and contrasting them with racism in America. This strategy enables students to see that the United States is not unique in its struggle against racism and potentially raises awareness about racism in other countries. Thus, students will be able to think about racism in America more critically, which may result in students having more knowledgeable discussions in class. This can lead to a mutual understanding about the problem of interracial tensions, which will help students foster respect for the views and perspectives of others, even when they disagree. Together, students can work toward creating ideas about what can be done to eradicate the racial problems that they identify in their schools, in their communities, and around the world.

Teachers can also alter instructional arrangements to foster positive intergroup racial interaction. One such change is the infusion of cooperative learning. Small groups of students become interdependent and thus form interpersonal and small-group skills,

and each group member is accountable to the other members (Johnson and Johnson 1994). This type of learning is critical because "effective social studies teaching . . . involves appropriate social study" (Stahl and Van Sickle 1992, 2). Social studies teachers must embrace this statement, as their classroom is a place where students should feel comfortable learning how to be productive citizens outside the classroom. Cooperative learning helps improve the social climate of a school and many aspects of social support (Weitzman 1992).

An example of effective cooperative learning is a teacher using structured group work to have students of different races work together (Banks 2002; O'Neal 1997-8). When students work on a project with someone of a different race and interact with and learn about the person, students will be able to "judge people on their own merits rather than on stereotypes" (Romo 1997, 4). However, although there is great potential for positive interracial interaction, Romo points out that if the group activities are poorly organized, the experience may be negative and may even reinforce the racial stereotypes. Therefore, it is critical that teachers create engaging activities that force all students in the group to work cooperatively, with each student being responsible for an equal share of the work while also being responsible to the other students.

The combination of these curricular and pedagogical changes will not immediately solve the problem of interracial group tensions and racism in America. However, taken together, these suggestions may provide students with the tools to build strong racial identities and achieve racial acceptance, understanding, and tolerance.

### Conclusion

Because racism is embedded in American culture, two questions come to mind: (1) Will changing pedagogical strategies to teach racial identity development and acceptance make a significant difference? and (2) Is implementing multicultural education in the classroom feasible? The answer to the first question is complicated. Working from the CMDE

framework, the answer to this question is contingent on longitudinal studies that examine how effective multicultural teaching techniques have been in providing students with positive racial identities and allowing them to be more accepting of other races. But how can scholars determine whether the outcomes they find are a result of the techniques used in the classroom or whether they are the result of other outside influences? Scholars must explore this question because it is uncertain if it is possible to bring about this change through education.

Changing curricula and pedagogical strategies along these lines is a long-term challenge. Racism is too entrenched in society for it to be eradicated by changing what is taught in schools. However, by changing what and how students are taught about race and culture, teachers can plant a seed that will be passed on from generation to generation, with the hope that in a few generations people will have more cross-cultural appreciation and respect than they do today. The goal is that racism will become an anomaly and aberration rather than the norm.

The question of feasibility comes down to two main issues: pressure on schools and resistance by current teachers. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the push toward standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing are formidable obstacles to infusing greater multicultural education into curricula. As a result, teachers lack flexibility in what they can teach, as students must master information-oriented social studies curricula. Teachers are first required to prepare their students to pass these tests (and their jobs often depend on it), and after that, they can add depth or creativity to what they teach in the small spaces left after test preparation. As a result, it is difficult to introduce multicultural education into the classroom. However, this does not mean it is impossible to change pedagogical techniques and curricula. Teacher education programs and professional development workshops can educate teachers about how to incorporate multicultural curricula into the required standards. Also, lobbyists and educators should push for more flexibility in the standards-based systems or devise a better assessment strategy than the current testing regimen.

With regard to resistance by teachers, the reality is that in any profession, there will never be universal acceptance of an idea about how to do one's job. However, if multicultural education is focused on more prominently in teacher education programs and taught as a part of student-teacher methods courses, teachers will gain the tools necessary to integrate such curricula into their daily teaching.

This education is also needed for school administrators and experienced teachers and can be done through continuing education and professional development workshops. This will enable all school personnel to be comfortable with tackling multicultural issues in schools. Professional development workshops should include methods for discussing race in classrooms and techniques for facilitating discussions about controversial topics, which will help teachers feel comfortable leading such discussions. Teachers should also engage in dialogue with their colleagues about the school's racial and cultural climate and what could be done to make each classroom a safe, nurturing place for each student.

Today, whites, blacks, Asians, Hispanics, and other people must live in an American society shaped by racism. If people want change, they must actively attempt to educate students to deconstruct the reasons behind the racial hatred and stereotypes that pervade society. This article is a call to teachers to make an effort to effect change and to scholars to continue research that will support change in pedagogical strategies and curricula. If this occurs, Americans may live in a more culturally and racially accepting country.

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