RESOURCES

To see graphs showing individual students scattered across an achievement distribution, see http://sociology.berkeley.edu/faculty/lucas/everydayantiracismfigures.pdf.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Principle:** How is considering students' concrete, lived experiences in the world different from thinking generically or "abstractly" about students as racial group members?
2. **Strategy:** Do you think that keeping your school's racial achievement averages in mind can *ever* serve students?
3. **Try tomorrow:** How might you actually interact with one of your students differently if you tried to discard generic racial notions about his or her potential achievement or academic interests?

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Pollock, Mica, Ed. Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real About Race in School. New York: The New Press, 2008.

13

Knowing Students as Individuals

Joshua Aronson

How can teachers mitigate the mistrust that students of color often feel in schools as social institutions? Over the past decade, research has shown that negative, stereotypic assumptions engender a range of academic problems. When students of color take standardized tests, they are often aware of the racist assumption that non-"white" groups have inferior intelligence, which increases their anxiety and impairs their performance.[1] When they expect to be treated with prejudice, students of color experience discomfort, perform poorly, and have difficulty maintaining their motivation in the face of teachers' criticisms.[2] In order to understand and remedy these problems, we must form and maintain trusting relationships, seeing and treating one another as individuals, rather than reducing one another to the social categories to which we belong. It would be absurd for teachers to pretend not to see a student's race or ethnicity. But as teachers, we must learn to see beyond these categories and avoid letting our stereotyped assumptions—and we all have them—obscure our views of students as individuals.

A recent study supports this argument. The researcher, Thomas Dee,[3] found that students tended to get higher test scores when assigned to a same-race teacher: black students performed more poorly when assigned to white teachers, just as white students performed more poorly when assigned to black teachers. But this happened only when the classes were large. If students were assigned to small classes where students and teachers had more opportunities to get to know and trust one another as individuals, the race of the teacher made no difference at all.

The experience of not being seen as an individual in the classroom engenders a deep sense of mistrust, separateness, and exclusion. My own efforts as a teacher and mentor have benefited most from one insight: my students want to be known and appreciated as unique individuals and not by a group stereotype—not as the short Latino guy, the blonde girl with braces, the quiet Asian, or the black guy in back third row.

The everyday antiracist "move" I rely upon is to cultivate a mindset of insatiable curiosity about my students as individuals: who they are, the experiences they have had, what they think about things, and how they think. Curiosity is

the diametrical opposite of stereotyping and prejudice, the assumption that you know who a person is, what they think, or how they will act simply because you know what category they belong to. Stereotypes are a lazy mind's best friend, a mental shortcut to save us the trouble of asking and listening. I try to do the opposite by getting curious. During class discussion, for example, I internally adopt the mindset that the bored-looking guy with the baseball cap on backward, slumped in his seat like the stereotypical frat-boy jock, may actually turn out to be the most interesting and intelligent person in the class if I can find out who he really is. Or I ask myself whether the "angry-looking" black woman in the third row might be concentrating hard, rather than feeling angry. More often than not, when I refrain from jumping to conclusions based on first impressions and seek constantly to get to know students as individuals, I end up learning that my stereotypic assumptions were wrong and that the individual is indeed a lot more interesting—and interested—than I would have assumed.

Curiosity, I have learned, tends to be contagious; when I model it to my students by asking them questions about themselves as individuals and their individual opinions in class discussions, they become more curious about one another, more respectful, more open. True curiosity is not a tactic; it is a mindset that cannot be faked. But I have found certain questions particularly helpful if I want to support their learning: "What do you think about the work we are doing?" "What motivates you?" "What can I do to help?" I have found no better words for inviting individual expression than these: "That's interesting." "Tell me more." "Help me understand." And often, the question that best cuts through the fog of stereotyping is this: "What are you going through?"

RESOURCES

E. Aronson. 2000. *Nobody Left to Hate: Teaching Compassion after Columbine*. New York: W.H. Freeman.

Joshua Aronson. 2004. "The Threat of Stereotype." *Educational Leadership* 62(3): 14–19.

Vivian G. Paley. 1979. *White Teacher*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Principle:** The suggestion to get to know students as individuals seems common sense. But how do we often fail to get to know our students individually?
2. **Strategy:** What pitfalls should educators remain mindful of as we "cultivate curiosity" about our students' individual ideas and experiences?

3. **Try tomorrow:** How might you start to get to know a particular student you do not yet really know at all?

Joshua Aronson is an associate professor of psychology and education at New York University. His research focuses on the social psychological influences on academic achievement, and he is internationally known for his research on how stereotypes affect performance.

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Showing Students Who You Are

Heather M. Pleasants

Consider this question: in your experience, what opportunities exist for teachers and students to understand one another beyond their school-defined identities? Schools offer few occasions for teachers and students to connect as complex individuals outside their prescribed roles. While conceptions of culturally relevant teaching and learning[1] emphasize the need for teachers to increase their knowledge of students' multifaceted identities, space for this kind of knowledge-building is often limited. Occasions for teachers to present themselves to their students as whole people are also limited.

In an antiracist classroom, just as teachers must strive to get to know their students as individuals, students should have opportunities to know their teachers. After a decade of teaching multicultural education to preservice and in-service teachers, I do not believe that we can practice antiracism while hiding behind a one-way pedagogical mirror, expecting students to open themselves personally while remaining closed about our personal lives and experiences. Revealing our own complexities to students is an important aspect of antiracist teaching because racism is partially about viewing others through a reductive lens, treating people as if they were defined by their racial-ethnic group membership. My proposed antiracist move involves sharing teachers' individual out-of-school identities with students, which facilitates the formation of authentic relationships between teachers and students in which both parties see each other as complex and rich human beings. The aspects of ourselves that we expose to students do not have to be explicitly related to race, though antiracist practices can be facilitated through the inclusion of these experiences in the curriculum. I call this process "growing our own points of connection" with students.

This suggestion is not without obvious dangers. As teachers, we often keep our out-of-school identities hidden. There are valid reasons to refrain from divulging those aspects of our lives not related to our roles as teachers. While students relish opportunities to see educators as real people, teachers are mindful of the fact that bringing our interests into day-to-day classroom interactions can be unproductive, detracting from students' interest in the material

and potentially distracting them from important topics and ideas. Concerns about how much personal information we divulge and how to integrate it into the curriculum are important. Yet, how can we expect students to take teachers' interests in their lives seriously if teachers do not reveal to their students what is central to their own lives?

I encourage my students who teach to find productive and creative ways to share their interests and passions with their students. My language development class encourages preservice teachers to think through two interrelated questions:

- Outside of school, what are you passionate about?
- How can you draw from these passions to create authentic points of human connection with students in your classroom?

To illustrate how connections might be made successfully, I present two examples drawn from the work of teachers in the class.

Ann is white and married, and was born and raised in New Jersey in a middle-class Italian American family. Ann is a poet as well as a middle school language arts teacher, and she has kept a journal since she was ten years old. Ann's identity as a writer contributes directly to her love of figurative language and her ability to teach her students how to identify and utilize figurative language as they write from different perspectives. Last year Ann asked the children to keep notebooks to record all of the instances of figurative language they heard during the day, as well as the context within which it was used. She began by sharing some of her own writing with students and referred to the figurative language that had been used in the classroom that morning. Students tuned in to the assignment immediately. They mentioned popular music and television programs, parents' conversations and, to the bemused dismay of her colleagues, discussions in other classes. So Ann decided to pursue the creation of "figurative language journals" that she could share with other teachers. Ann's students have used their journals to grow as readers and writers, and Ann has used their journals to construct more nuanced understandings of the students' interests and perspectives.

Stacey is a white, single twenty-two-year-old, originally from an upper-middle class family that still lives in a small town in Ohio. As a teenager, she was a member of a puppet theater company that performed at her church and local schools. She kept two of her favorite puppets in shadowboxes in her apartment. Stacey is also a novice second-grade teacher in an inner-city charter school; most of her students are from low-income families, and many are students of color. Although she has picked up some elements of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), to which her students have responded favorably, she often senses that her students and their parents lack respect for her as a newcomer to the community and are skeptical about what she is

trying to do in the classroom. Stacey has identified three girls in her class who regularly engage in behavior and conversations that undermine her instructional goals. Three weeks into the new school year, one of the girls in the group called her a "bitch." Initially, Stacey tried to connect with her students by being "sweet," but after a miserable first year of teaching, she tried something unconventional. She made three sock puppets and brought them into her classroom to complement her science and math instruction, the two curriculum areas in which she and her students struggled the most. Stacey introduced the puppets to the class at the same time that she shared her previous puppeteering experience. She had them speak in AAVE. Over time, the puppets have become an alter ego for Stacey in the classroom. She has used the puppets' AAVE to engage playfully in conversations about her lack of knowledge of her students' social and cultural worlds, and her students have begun to feel more comfortable in bringing their experiences into classroom activities.

The point of these examples is not the specifics of what these teachers did; doing a figurative language lesson and making puppets and learning to speak in AAVE draw on these particular teachers' individual skills and interests. The point is that these two teachers' selective inclusion of their out-of-school lives served as a point of departure for them to connect with their students as complex and authentic human beings, and for their students to connect with their teachers as people with interests and passions that go well beyond their formal interactions during the school day. Crucial to these teachers' experiments was continual reflection concerning how what they did in the classroom could open up their own thinking and their students' thinking about one another as complex individuals with varying interests and perspectives. We discussed such questions as:

- How might we, as teachers and learners, make a space to include our out-of-school lives in the curriculum, and to analyze if and how that inclusion is serving the learning process?
- What creative strategies might we need to employ to do this kind of pedagogical work and still accomplish mandated goals?

For some teachers, answers to these questions led them to apply for grants for supplies and release time.

The growth of connections and opportunities for dialogue between teachers and students is a fundamental aspect of everyday antiracism. By bringing what is meaningful to us in our out-of-school lives into the classroom and finding appropriate ways to include our interests in our instruction, we can grow our own spaces for connection to students who may feel that their own out-of-school lives are irrelevant to formal learning activities. By integrating what excites you beyond your work as a teacher into your pedagogy,

questions concerning race and culture can be framed by "What can I do to help the kids better understand me?" as well as "What can I do to understand these kids?"

RESOURCES

P.A. Connor-Greene, C. Mobley, C.E. Paul, J.A. Waldvogel, L. Wright, and A. Young, eds. 2006. *Teaching and Learning Creatively: Inspirations and Reflections*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press.

The Creative Teaching Site: www.creativeteachingsite.com.

P. McKay, and K. Gaves, eds. 2006. *Planning and Teaching Creatively within Required Curriculum for School-age Learners*. Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Principle:** Why might it be "antiracist" to use some of your individual passions to help build personal connections with your students?
2. **Strategy:** How might "growing your own" points of connection to students help you pursue standardized or mandated goals?
3. **Try tomorrow:** What specific skill or interest of yours would you like to bring in to your classroom?

Heather M. Pleasants is an assistant professor of qualitative research at the University of Alabama. Dr. Pleasants's research explores links between voice, identity, multimodal literacy, and social justice. Through this work, she is dedicated to promoting public discourse that actively challenges traditional distinctions between teaching, research, and service.

Alice McIntyre is professor and chairperson of the Elementary Education Program at Hellenic College in Brookline, MA. She has written extensively about whiteness, education, and the use of participatory action research (PAR) to address issues salient to inner-city youth in the United States and women in the north of Ireland.

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Locating Yourself for Your Students

Priya Parmar and Shirley Steinberg

As teachers, we have found that identifying ourselves to students in terms of our own positionality—that is, naming exactly who we are in terms of the racial, ethnic, and religious group memberships that affect our social position—has been a way to carve a safe space for students in which to discuss sensitive racial and ethnic matters. We have also found that as educators, we cannot possibly begin to teach with frankness unless we name who we are in relation to our curriculum and admit what we do and do not know.

We are both professors of education; Steinberg identifies herself as Jewish and White, Parmar as Asian Indian. We have been working in the public high schools of Brooklyn and the Bronx using hip-hop as a way to interest students in literacy. In four schools, we have been collaborating with a spoken word collective and high school teachers to write, perform, and publish poetry via poetry slams. When we start working with the students in these classes, we meet them, explain our program, and explain our vision of using hip-hop to create art. This essay focuses not on our curriculum but on how we introduce ourselves. What we thought was just part of being authentic educators has become one of the most essential parts of our pedagogy.

Shirley: When I began to work with adolescents in an all-Black and Latino/a high school in the poorest part of the Bronx, I knew I was not only old—a product of the sixties—but also White and Jewish. My goal was to utilize students' knowledge of hip-hop as a vehicle for literacy. The first time I worked with a class, I waited for the teacher to introduce me. He mentioned I was a professor, and the students were understandably bored. I have never felt so White, so over-thirty, or so not hip-hop. After he called me to the front, a few students clapped, but most did not even look up.

I stood in front of about thirty students, looked around, and began: "I'll bet you're wondering what a frizzy-haired Jewish woman is doing up here talking to you about hip-hop." There was not a sound in the room, and then a girl turned to the class: "No, she didn't." The students hooted, clapped, and laughed. She added she had never heard a white person say they were White, and the other students agreed. Interestingly, I had not said I was White;

I said I was Jewish. But I was obviously White, and that is what she saw and heard. We began to discuss race. They said they knew at every moment of their lives that they were not White, but they felt White people did not know that they were White. Months later they would still recall the time I said I was Jewish, laugh, and shake their heads that no other White person had ever told them that. They said they appreciated that in our classroom, they did not have to act as if it were a secret that I was White, while they were expected to talk about being Black, Latino, or Asian—topics that the hip-hop curriculum naturally raised.

Priya: As I began work with adolescents in three Brooklyn high schools predominantly composed of Black and/or Latino/a students, I introduced myself to the classes in a way that I felt would link me to the students. Before coming up to the front, I saw that I was the only Indian or South Asian in the room. I wondered to myself if the school had any Indian students. Raised in a rural town in central Pennsylvania, I was always aware that I was different. Feeling very alone as a youth, I turned to hip-hop and found music and words that fit how I related to the world. After finishing my dissertation on KRS-One and hip-hop culture, I felt my experiences, expertise, and scholarship would work well in our school collaborations.

Like Shirley, I was introduced to the class by the teacher. The students were equally unexcited. I faced them and, feeling like I could read their minds, I knew I had to name who I was. I began to speak about my feelings of alienation as a woman of color in a White school. The students were visibly shocked. As Latino/as and African Americans, they had never thought of South Asians as persons of color. My comment about my own color was surprising to them, as was my knowledge of hip-hop and familiarity with their musical tastes and idols. Unlike Shirley, I discussed my positionality as one of shared oppression and alienation. My candor, like Shirley's, reached the students, and they were immediately more comfortable with my efforts to engage them in these conversations as an educator.

Both of us realized that our willingness to discuss our race and ethnicity with our students allowed them to feel more comfortable as we worked together. Race was not always discussed, but in this hip-hop curriculum, much of the writing the students chose to do centered on racial identity and, at times, gender and class, and critiques of racism. Their poetry and writing naturally went to their own identity issues, self-identification, and positionality. As adolescents they were acutely conscious of how they appeared to peers. But this was the first time for many that they were able to self-identify to adult educators and be confident that we would listen. Our students began to write and perform passionately about the recovery of their own ethnic identities, and their struggles as young women and men of color living in a male-dominated and white-dominated society.

As we engage students with hip-hop and literacy, we now always name our

positionality; when introducing our curriculum, we say who we are in relation to it. We say what we know and what we do not know. This self-identification has helped us bridge the gaps that we feared would be too broad as we undertook a curriculum that was seemingly the students' own. These experiences have kept us thinking about how educators are often afraid of racial differences and fearful of naming them. Because whiteness is so often treated as invisible, as if only non-Whites are racially and ethnically positioned, White teachers often are particularly afraid to name their own positionality. Identity, including whiteness, is not absolute or fixed; rather, identity is always changing and evolving. Yet we contend that the denial of the existence of the educator's own positionality creates more barriers and a lack of trust, especially when students are asked so often to name theirs. When an educator's whiteness is unnamed, it remains in a dominant position, reinforcing that it is the noncolor color by which all other colors are measured. We have seen that when White teachers in racially mixed classrooms are unable or unwilling to name their own position in relation to the curriculum, they fail to engage their students in important inquiry that challenges the boundaries of all categories, including whiteness, frames all identity as changing and evolving, and critically examines the often unnamed dominance of whiteness in popular ideology.[1] Alternatively, to spark such inquiry, it is often equally important for non-White educators to name their positionality.

The desire of many adolescents of color to choose race and ethnicity as a theme in their writing is strong. After educators position themselves regarding these issues, students are freer to discuss issues of race beyond their own identities. Particularly when White educators name their identities in conversations with students and disclose how they view their knowledge in relation to the curriculum they teach, students feel freer to discuss how they view not only the educator, but also themselves and the world.

RESOURCES

Gary Howard. 2006. *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers in Multicultural Classrooms*. 2nd ed. New York: Teachers College Press.

R. Jensen. 2005. *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

T. Wise. 2004. *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*. New York: Soft Skull Books.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Principle:** How can you imagine it being useful to position yourself in terms of your racial-ethnic group membership, prior knowledge, or life experience in relation to your curriculum? Under what circumstances do you think it might *not* be useful to do so?

2. **Strategy:** What types of "positioning" statements made by a teacher might make your school's students feel more comfortable and ready to inquire? What types of positioning statements might reduce that comfort and spirit of inquiry?
3. **Try tomorrow:** What might you say to students in your own classroom to start to position yourself in relation to some unit or topic you teach? Try role-playing this introduction.

Priya Parmar earned her doctorate from the Pennsylvania State University in 2002 in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in language and literacy education. Her scholarly interests include critical, multiple literacies, multicultural education, youth culture, and other contemporary issues in the field of cultural studies in which economic, political, and social justice issues are addressed.

Shirley R. Steinberg teaches at McGill University. Her areas of research encompass youth culture, social justice, and education (race, class, gender, sexuality issues), critical pedagogy, and cultural and media studies. She is the founding editor of Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education.

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Expanding Definitions of "Good Teaching"

Lee Anne Bell

Several years ago, I spent a school year with a multiracial group of third- through sixth-grade girls in an urban elementary school examining issues of gender, race, and achievement.[1] Over nine months of weekly meetings and multiple classroom observations, I got to know these girls and their teachers quite well. One day I asked the girls to tell me about the qualities of their favorite teacher. Before I could add, "Don't tell me a name, just the qualities," came a unanimous chorus, "Ms. Johnson! Ms. Johnson!" When I probed to find out why she was their favorite teacher, one white fourth-grader said, "Because we know she loves us!" The eager nods of other girls in the group affirmed that the speaker had gotten it right.

This conversation challenged my own assumptions about good teaching, because I had not seen Ms. Johnson as a notably good teacher. After observing Ms. Johnson's classroom two or three times, I considered her loud and overbearing. I had a specific model of good teaching that regards warmth and positive feedback as an essential way of engaging student voices and encouraging democratic participation in the learning community. Until then, I had not considered that there might be other ways of reaching these goals, or even that warmth could be expressed in various voice tones and at other volumes. Clearly the students saw warmth and encouragement in Ms. Johnson's style that I had failed to see.

Curious to know more, I asked Ms. Johnson to sit down with me to talk about teaching, and she graciously agreed. In the course of our conversation, I asked her how she had decided to become a teacher and what her goals were for her classroom. She told me she had grown up in a cohesive, conservative, all-black working-class community in the segregated South. During her middle and high school years, she had excelled as a learner but felt that, as a black girl, she had been discouraged from developing her full potential based on gender stereotypes held by her black teachers, both male and female. She stated that she pushed her female students in ways she wished she herself had been pushed. She was convinced that this would help her students overcome barriers of sexism, racism, and poverty. Her intentions