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EVERYDAY ANTIRACISM IN EDUCATION

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Introduction

The world of K-12 education contains infinitely complex race questions—and endlessly oversimplified race answers. In US K-12 education, the field in which I work as an anthropologist of education, “race groups” are often portrayed as falsely static, firmly bounded groups. They are portrayed as “cultural” groups, if not explicitly “genetic” ones, with different ways of behaving that directly cause racially inequitable outcomes like “achievement.” Educators need tools for thinking and talking far more complexly about racialized difference and racial inequality.

Race Wrestling

I have found that anthropology and its methodological tool, ethnography, offer some key components for moving dialogue in education beyond oversimplified notions of “racial” difference and oversimplified explanations for racial inequality. For rather than simply asking respondents to restate these commonsense notions, ethnography can show educators the ways in which they and their students struggle daily *with* race. By focusing attention on *everyday struggles* over race categories and racial inequality, ethnography can facilitate what I call “race wrestling”: people struggling self-consciously with normalized ideas about “racial” difference and about how racial inequality is produced.

Anthropology, in its serious attention to the ongoing everyday activity of ordinary people, also helps educators think about how their own ordinary moves either reproduce or challenge structures of racial inequality. Educators need tools for analyzing the consequences of their everyday behaviors because they are often unsure which ordinary moves, in an already racialized world, are racist and which antiracist. Indeed, antiracist educators must constantly negotiate between two *antiracist* impulses in deciding their everyday behaviors toward students.

Moment to moment, they must choose between the antiracist impulse to treat all people as human beings *rather* than “race” group members, and the antiracist impulse to recognize people’s real experiences as race group members in order to assist them and treat them equitably.

The ethnographic question to ask about antiracism in education is thus not abstractly *whether* people should be treated or not treated as race group members in schools (this is the typical US debate about “race consciousness” vs “color blindness”), but rather concretely *when* and *how* it helps in real life in specific places to treat people as race group members, and when and how it harms. Static advice to “be colorblind” regarding one’s students, or to “celebrate” their diversity, or to “recognize” their “identities,” is not equally helpful in all situations. In daily life, *sometimes* being colorblind is quite harmful to young people; *sometimes* a “celebration” of diversity can be reductive and harmful; *sometimes* “recognizing” one aspect of an identity (a student’s or one’s own) detracts from a sense of common humanity.

Educators in the US and elsewhere are routinely given too-static, overarching, abstracted recommendations for dealing with race in school. Educators need instead to wrestle with their own daily *struggles over* race in educational settings, and to consider moment to moment decisions about how best to assist real children in real world situations.

Lessons for Antiracist Practice

Some lessons for everyday antiracist practice in education have emerged in a forthcoming collection of essays I am editing (see the work of sociologist Michele Lamont for exploration of “everyday antiracism” in other realms). These lessons engage, in part, Audrey Smedley’s arguments about the key features of racism since race categories were developed to facilitate slavery and colonial expansion in the 15th century. Then and today, racism has been about building structures of unequal resource and power on oversimplified notions of human difference. Today, racism still involves unequally measuring human worth, intelligence and potential along static “racial” lines, and accepting the distribution of racially unequal opportunities, and the production of racially patterned disparities, as if these are normal.

Everyday antiracism in education thus requires that educators make strategic, self-conscious everyday moves to counter these ingrained tendencies. First, then, everyday antiracism in education involves *rejecting false notions of human difference*, and actively treating people as equally human, worthy, intelligent and potentialized. In educational settings, antiracism particularly requires actively affirming that intelligence is equally distributed to human beings, and that no “race group” is more or less intelligent than any other. Antiracism in education also involves actively rejecting race categories’ “genetic” reality. It involves learning, proactively, that “races” are not groups that are genetically different in

any real way, but rather geographical groups that developed minor physical differences and have come over centuries of social practice to live very different lives. Everyday antiracism in education also involves challenging oversimplified notions of human diversity, and asserting that complex people do not always fit easily into single, simple boxes of “racial” (or “ethnic”) identity or behavior.

Second, everyday antiracism in education involves *acknowledging and engaging lived experiences along racial lines*, even if the categories themselves have been built upon genetically insignificant differences. Over six centuries of American history, people have both been lumped into ranked “races” by others, and chosen race-group membership for themselves as a means for social empowerment. The Irish “became white” in the 19th century, and Jews “became white” in the 20th; “Asian-Americans” became “Asian-Americans” in the 1960s; then too emerged “Latinos” or “Hispanics.” Today, we all make one another “racial” on a daily basis. Racialized “groups” in the US today bring very different experiences to the table, and they are shaped by very different experiences with educational resources, opportunity and success. Everyday antiracism thus entails engaging one’s own and others’ experiences of this differential treatment—whether we have benefited from such differential treatment or been sabotaged by it.

Third, everyday antiracism in education also involves *capitalizing upon, building upon and celebrating* those diversities that have developed over centuries and decades to sustain strength and foster enjoyment within racialized groups, long grouped involuntarily and destructively by external others and grouped proactively and positively by themselves. As Cornel West wrote in “Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power,” being “black,” for example, involves both the negative experience of responding constantly to denials of equal opportunity (typically, in history, at the hands of “whites”) and the positive experience of enjoying a community that has bonded through expressive and political practices with one another even in the midst of such oppression. Antiracism thus requires *enjoying and sharing* difference in ways that assist individuals to feel respected, broadened and challenged. It involves not just sharing and respecting “group” forms of expression, but also sharing and respecting the critical lenses that members of various “groups” bring to any table.

Fourth, everyday antiracism in education involves *equipping self and others to challenge racial inequality*. Everyday antiracism particularly involves actively challenging the widespread tendency to see racial disparities in opportunity and outcome as “normal.” Everyday antiracism in education involves clarifying any ways in which opportunities must still be equalized along racial lines, and then equipping people to actually equalize life chances and opportunities arbitrarily reduced along racial lines. Everyday antiracism in education also entails proactively reminding students of color laboring under false notions of racial “inability” that they are equally intelligent and potentialled. Everyday antiracism in education also entails reminding white students that they

are not naturally superior, but rather privileged by an intricate system that they, too, can make more equitable for others.

These four paragraphs suggest seemingly contradictory things: rejecting false notions of human difference, engaging lived experiences shaped along racial lines, enjoying versions of such difference, and constantly critiquing and challenging systems of racial inequality built upon these notions of difference. The four are actually not self-contradictory. Rather, they demonstrate that everyday antiracism requires doing each situationally on a daily basis. Antiracism requires *not* treating people as race group members when such treatment harms, and *treating* people as race group members when such treatment assists. Deciding which move to take when requires thinking hard about everyday life in educational settings as complex, conflict-ridden and deeply consequential. Anthropology can assist educators and students to turn a critical analytic lens on their own everyday experiences in schools and districts to see how “racial” difference and racial inequality are being produced or dismantled in small bits.

Mica Pollock is the author of *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School* and the forthcoming *Everyday Justice: Disputing Educational Discrimination in the New Civil Rights Era*. She is editor of the forthcoming book *Everyday Antiracism: Concrete Ways to Successfully Navigate the Relevance of Race in School*.