

## CASE STUDIES FOR DECISION MAKING

### Case Study 1: Developing the Ability to Teach about Race and Racism

**Topic:** Race

**Title:** The Complexity of Race

**Teaching Skill:** Developing the ability to teach about race and racism.

**Learning Outcome 1:** Define and examine the historical and social construction of race and U.S. racism by understanding how racism influences the policies and practices that permeate U.S. institutions and schools.

**Learning Outcome 2:** Identify cultural, individual, and institutional racism in U.S. schools and the consequences for students.

Educators need to understand the complex nature of racism: that it is a social and historical construct; that there are individual, institutional, and cultural forms of racism, all of which suppress racial minorities; and that they can resist and disrupt racism by teaching about race and racism in their classrooms. By recognizing race as a social construct, educators can comprehend the complexities of racism in their own unexamined assumptions, values, and interactions with students. This enables teachers to make informed decisions that provide more equitable access to education for students of color, and to make curriculum choices that help *all* students, including non-minority students, understand the impact of racism in society and in their daily lives.

**Teachers who are able to teach about race and racism:**

#### ***Understand race as a social and historical construct***

In the U.S. most long-term residents have been raised to believe that the human species can be divided into scientifically valid categories based on physical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, eye shape, and shape of head or nose. For centuries, U.S. religious, legal, political, and educational institutions promoted the belief that visible physical traits were not only indicators of biological divisions of the human race, they were also linked to different capacities for intellectual achievement, civilized behavior, and a range of cultural attributes. Teachers must know that humans belong to a single race that evolved in Africa, that there are thousands of human populations that are subsets of this human species, and that racial traits comprise only a tiny fraction of all human genetic variation. Knowing a person's race does not reveal that individual's DNA, or any biological, behavioral, intellectual or moral attributes. Charles Darwin attacked the scientific use of race and other scholars refer to race as "man's most dangerous myth" because it is at the root of racial prejudice (the belief that some "races" are inferior) and has created myths of racial superiority. Race is a cultural invention that provides opportunities and rights to some and denies privilege, access, and power to others. When whole groups of people are deemed inferior, it makes it easier to justify genocide, slavery, or exclusion from U.S. society, like the denial of citizenship. In the United States race historically provided a rationalization for oppressing Africans who were valued for their ability to farm. To justify slavery, institutional policies and practices were created to deny human rights to African Americans in slavery. This legacy of injustice persists in U.S. history and society today.

### ***Can differentiate between individual, institutional, and cultural racism:***

Racism operates on three interrelated levels: individual, institutional and cultural. Individual racism is the belief that one's own race is superior to another (racial prejudice) and behavior that suppresses members of the so-called inferior race (racial discrimination). The racist action is overt and observable. Teachers may or may not be aware that they hold racial prejudices, or that their behavior discriminates against students of color. For example, an elementary school teacher who believes that her African American and Latino children are less capable than her White students consciously assigns them to groups where the materials are less desirable and challenging. She cares for her students and feels she doing her best to reach them all, but the less challenging curriculum she provides some is unfair. Institutional racism consists of established laws, customs, and practices that systematically reflect and produce racial inequalities in a society, whether or not individuals who maintain those policies and practices (and/or benefit from them) have racist intentions. Here the perpetrator is not evident because institutional racism is imbedded in long-standing policies and practices that seem normal and natural. Examples of institutional racism include formal and informal real estate practices that deny people of color access to housing in certain sections of town, clubs and organizations such as fraternities and sororities that discriminate against some racial groups, and school textbooks on the approved list that present erroneous information about certain racial groups or omit their perspectives and contributions, as often happens in lessons about slavery and the American Civil War, the westward movement, and American literature. Cultural racism combines both individual racism, a belief in the superiority of Anglo-European culture, and institutional racism, the subtle and pervasive uses of power by Whites to perpetuate their own cultural heritage and impose it on others, while suppressing and/or destroying the cultures of ethnic minorities. Cultural racism is evident in the formal curriculum, tests, media, and course offerings when multiple ethnic groups' perspectives are not included; standardized tests that include content students have not been taught is one egregious example, especially when they deny access to students of color who wish to become teachers and could provide broader perspectives to the school environment. Cultural racism is also evident in White privilege, the invisible unearned advantages that give White people a head start in life, whether or not they are aware of it. Some of these benefits people are being viewed as "the real Americans" (not foreigners), learning about their history in school, having a voice in public discourse, and not having to see or deal with racism on a regular basis, like paying more for loans, being by-passed by taxi drivers, or being perceived the nanny or gardener in their own home. When White people are unaware of racism in their own lives they tend not to recognize it in the lives of people of color; about 90% of our teachers are White and if they are unaware of White privilege they are not likely to see the racism many of their students experience.

### ***Can help students become aware of racism and its impact on their lives***

When educators understand how race and racism operate within the United States, they can support the academic success and achievement of students historically marginalized by racism. They can also make White students aware of their privileges, whether or not they are *economically* advantaged, as well as ways they can work for a more just society. A first step is revision of the curriculum. For instance, teachers can teach about racism across the curriculum, along with our nation's core democratic values that provide a strong basis to work for change, through the long-standing denial of schooling for African Americans who were unjustly enslaved and denied basic human rights. Because the

U.S. constitution guaranteed that *all men are created equal*, race distinctions that led to institutional practices were needed to justify oppression of particular groups of people. Students can learn about individuals and groups (African Americans and their White allies) who worked to bring about public education for children of *all* ethnic groups, including low-income Whites. When the study of racism is included in curriculum content, teachers need to create classroom climate of trust and respect. Competent teachers ensure *all* students can be successful by providing needed support to scaffold student learning; they ensure *all* have a voice by providing clear guidelines that enable students to affirm and respect each other during discussions and group work; and they model ways to identify and resist racism by sharing examples of racism in their own lives.

## **Part 1 Scenario:**

Ms. Welch, inspired by a workshop where she and other teachers created poems about their family heritage, decided to replicate the experience with her 8<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts class. She had already established a climate of trust in the classroom, and the students had studied a variety of historical issues pertaining to race in their social studies class. She knew that poetry was to be addressed in the learning standards, so she excitedly developed the curriculum.

After she created her enduring understandings, or big ideas about race and identity, Mrs. Welch connected her lessons to essential outcomes. She then sent a note home to parents explaining the unit and asking for questions, concerns, and guidance. She also invited parents to the poetry slam and art celebration that would culminate the unit. Ms. Welch allowed for two weeks to clearly scaffold the experience of writing the poem. Two class times were allowed for each stanza. There would be two days to share the final product. She worked in conjunction with the art teacher to create a final product using the visual arts to represent the completed poem. Ms. Welch was excited to bring this experience to her students.

She introduced the unit by reading her own poem aloud. Throughout her reading, Ms. Welch's eyes welled with tears. After she completed the reading, she went through each stanza explaining what the each line meant to her. Ms. Welch invited students to ask questions or make connections to her poem.

Shaunte asked, "Miss, what do you mean by the boarding schools: Chemawa and Haskell?"

"That is a really good question. Those were the two American Indian boarding schools that my grandparents attended. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the policy toward educating American Indians was complicated. The institutions often reinforced the philosophy that in order for Indigenous people to be successful within Western society they needed to *kill the Indian to save the man*. To do accomplish this goal many children were taken from their communities and placed in schools where they lived far away from their families. Both of my grandparents attended different boarding schools during their high school years. They had conflicting experiences. My grandmother, who had lived through extreme poverty, was able to get an accredited education that later enabled her to attend college and become a teacher. My grandfather, on the other hand, struggled in the boarding school. His culture and identity were not affirmed. During this era, many children were beaten for speaking their Native language. The schools were military in nature, which was quite different from many Indigenous

children's way of being in the world. Most students were not encouraged to continue their education, instead they were trained to become working class laborers," responded Ms. Welch.

"Ms. Welch, what did you mean by blood quantum and survivance?" Krysta enquired.

"First, survivance is a powerful word, Krysta. That means that my ancestors, like my great-great-grandmother, who survived the Baker's Massacre, wanted us to know our history so that we understood that we not only survived genocide, but we resisted it too. She wanted us to remember that we are strong and that we must always fight against injustice and honor our communities, without having to become victims of the past."

"Second, when I wrote that ... *we are bound by blood quantum through the allotment act, place, colonization, and survivance*, I was describing how American Indians are racially defined by the federal government. In order to determine who would be allotted land when Native People were subjected to living on reservations, policies had to be created to *name* or *label* American Indians. This is how we came to be racially determined. Indigenous people prior to colonization did not use blood quantum, or the amount of Indigenous heritage (whether you are full blood, half, quarter, or an eighth, etc.) to decide who was Indian."

Carlos commented, "Miss, I like how you said you were going to *deny the stereotypes imposed on* your heritage. I think about the stereotypes people use about me and my Mexican heritage, too."

"Thank you, Carlos. Did anyone else relate to that line as well?"

"Yes, Miss, I did. I also related to the part of your poem when you said: *I am Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, Cherokee, and White. I am a hybrid: Indigenous and exogenous. I am auburn haired, olive skinned, strong bodied with dark brown eyes. I am asked, "What are you? White? Mexican? ... No, you're not Indian,*" said Allie.

"Tell me more, Allie," encouraged Ms. Welch.

"Well, I'm multi-heritage or multiracial too. My dad identifies as Japanese American and my mom is White. I have red hair, too. People don't believe that I have Japanese heritage and that is the part of my family heritage that I identify with the most. It is very frustrating, because I don't *look* the way most people think Asians should look.

After engaging in a lively discussion with the class, Ms. Welch then shared her own reflections after writing the poem. She described how powerful it was to think about race and how it affected her personally. Ms. Welch emphasized how history and government policies had shaped her racial identities. She hoped that by sharing her experience, that her students would feel comfortable sharing, their own experiences about developing deeper understandings race. She knew it was often a difficult topic to explore and talk about. She then encouraged her students to write, think, and create with depth and clarity.

Throughout the next two weeks, students used writing tools, portfolios, and peer assessment to develop their poems. Ms. Welch made herself available for writing conferences and offered final editing for the poems. Ms. Welch supported each student individually and maintained high expectations for all. Finally, during the two days of celebration, families, community members, teachers, students, and

administrators attended their poetry and art slam. The event was well attended and successful. At the conclusion, Mrs. Welch requested that her students evaluate the assignment and invited her parents to do so as well.

Most of the students found the activity to be profoundly moving and wrote that it was well worth the effort. A few students felt that they were not comfortable sharing about their racial identity for fear that they would become targets of discrimination or racism. And a handful of students revealed that they didn't like the activity because they didn't see how their White identity was being affirmed. Here are some sample responses:

*I loved this activity, Ms. Welch! Thank you for giving me an opportunity to share my experience. In school I haven't had a chance to really talk about what it means to be Arab American and how my family and I are treated. I also learned so much about my classmates. I didn't know that they had experiences like mine, too.*

*Dear Ms. Welch... To be honest, I didn't want to do this at first. I'm Irish and Italian. I thought I would be attacked for being White. But, instead, I learned a lot about myself, especially that my family experienced oppression as immigrants. My friends were so nice too. I learned about them and I also learned that just because I am White doesn't mean that I can't fight against racism.*

*I still don't know how I feel about this activity. I appreciated your example, Ms. Welch, but I am still struggling with being multiracial: African American and European American. I look Black, but my mom is White. I struggle because most of my friends are Black. I don't want them to make fun of me or say, "You're acting White." So I don't think I shared everything about myself.*

*This was not my favorite assignment. I'm White and I know that you said I shouldn't feel guilty, but I do. I know that most of the things we do in class make me feel great, but I didn't like feeling different this time.*

*When Ms. Welch asked the parents, administrators, community members and teachers to evaluate the experience, there was a variety of responses. While the overall evaluations were positive, there were a few concerns. Ms. Welch reflected on the following evaluations:*

*While I thought the children did a good job, I was a little uncomfortable with the topic of race. May I suggest something a little more pleasing for the next poetry slam? How about Valentine's Day poems, instead? ~ Community Member.*

*My daughter never talks about school. In fact, I have a hard time getting her to do homework. I didn't like school much either. But this time, she was so proud of her poem and she actually involved me in her schoolwork. I couldn't wait to support her when she read her poem. I was so touched and proud. I am going to share this with her grandmother. Thank you, Ms. Welch! ~ Parent*

*I have to admit that I was a little concerned about this project, Ms. Welch. I didn't think you could pull it off. I have one of your students, Carlos, in my ESL class. I didn't think he was capable of writing like that. And the way he presented the poem and his art was incredible. I was surprised. Thanks for helping me to see this student through new eyes. ~ Teacher*

*Dear Ms. Welch... Your students shined!!! The poems and art instillation were fantastic. Again your students have proven that when given the opportunity to succeed, even when statistically they are from marginalized communities and districts, they can defy stereotypes. Wonderful!! ~ Administrator.*

**Question 1:**

Where do you see examples of the social and historical construction of race in the classroom scenario?

**Question 2:**

Where in this scenario do you see an example of individual, institutional, and cultural racism?

**Question 3:**

Was Ms. Welch able to help students become aware of racism and its impact on their lives? If so, how did she do it? If not, what could she have done better?

## **Part 2 Scenario:**

In the following scenario, Mr. Clarke attempts to recreate Ms. Welch's poetry unit:

Mr. Clarke wanted to use Ms. Welch's poetry unit as a model for his own unit on poetry. He was also interested in reaching out to his students living in the urban community in which he did not live. Following the writer's workshop model with portfolios and peer assessments, Mr. Clarke felt comfortable using the culturally based curriculum. His classroom consisted of about 35% African American, 35% Latino/a, 20% European American, and 10% Asian American self-identified students. He worked hard at creating a friendly environment for his high school juniors.

Although Mr. Clarke had the best intentions of meeting his students' needs both academically and culturally, he struggled. His discomfort escalated considerably as he noticed students writing about their racialized experiences. Some young African American men wrote of being racially profiled by police simply walking home from school. Some students described instances of violence they had witnessed living in the city. One Korean American student wrote about feeling heartbroken when a teacher she trusted used disparaging language about Asians. Another student described a high school counselor who refused to assist Latino/a students when they wanted help in filling out college applications. Mr. Clarke did not know what to do with this information. In fact, he found it impossible to believe the stories he was reading.

One afternoon he held a class meeting to discuss the appropriate information that should be in the poem. He explained that some of the students in the class would need to begin the assignment again. If their draft was missing from their writing folder, they would have to arrange a private meeting with him. One afternoon, Jada, a Mexican American student, met with Mr. Clarke:

"Good afternoon, Jada. I want to start by saying how well you have done in class. I was a little concerned at first, but your writing has greatly improved. I actually think the poem you are writing is the best I have seen this year. However, I am concerned about some of the things you are talking about."

"Like what?" asked Jada.

“You wrote that you heard Ms. Horn tell a student in homeroom that he had better put his energy into becoming a gardener like his father, rather than thinking he could possibly go to college to receive a degree in Sustainable Agriculture,” Mr. Clarke stressed.

“She did Mr. Clarke...And I have heard her talking with other teachers saying that it is a joke that any of the Hispanic students think they can go to college.”

Mr. Clarke responded, “Jada, I’m sure she didn’t mean that Hispanic people are not as intelligent. And she wouldn’t say that. I know Ms. Horn. She is very fair and has helped many students go to college. And in all fairness, many Hispanics do make good gardeners. Is there anything wrong with that?”

Jada, stunned by the last comment caught her breath and responded, “I know, Ms. Horn helps most of my White classmates, but I even tried to make an appointment to see her. She said that if my mom can’t come in during school hours. . . . And my mom works a lot. . . that she won’t waste her time seeing me. It would just be a waste of her time. She said I should consider a trade school. I really think she doesn’t like Mexicans.”

“Well, I just can’t imagine...I have heard Ms. Horn say numerous times that she doesn’t see color, all her students are the same to her. Anyway, I don’t think this is the kind of thing you should be writing about, Jada. I want you to eliminate that section of your poem and think about something good about your experience at school or something you eat or celebrate.... And write about that instead. I look forward to seeing your next draft. Keep up the good work on your writing,” encouraged Mr. Clarke.

“Ok,” Jada responded in a quiet, deflated voice.

**Question 1:**

Are examples of the social and historical construction of race evident in this scenario?

**Question 2:**

Reflecting on this scenario, provide an example of individual, institutional, and cultural racism.

**Question 3:**

Is Mr. Clark able to help students become aware of racism and its impact on their lives?