

The Trouble With Friendship: Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Race

A Book Review by Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

W e at NSRF have added social equity to our mission statement. We have read texts and held conversations about the ways to regularly embed a focus on equity into the protocols we use to examine student and adult work. We've held meetings with "equity" as their theme or focus. And this past June, about twenty of us held an electronic book chat to discuss *The Trouble with Friendship, Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Race*, by Benjamin DeMott.

Having participated in these initiatives, I am taking stock and wondering about next steps. More important, I'm thinking about the impact of these actions on my work with other educators and whether shifts in my understanding are making a difference for students.

The need to embed a focus on equity in my/our work is an issue for me because I am white. Last year, a colleague of color from Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools (BAYCES) made it very clear that equity and race are on the table for her by virtue of her presence in any conversation. I cannot lay claim to that same consistency because as Peggy MacIntosh describes in *Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege*, as a white person in our society, I have the option to check in and out of this struggle at will. Given this reality, I am faced with ongoing choices and a need to continually examine both my assumptions and my practice on behalf of students, especially those students of color who make up the majority of our student body in the urban schools

where I work.

So I'm asking myself, how willing am I to be disturbed? How much energy am I willing to spend moving beyond what Victor Cary calls

"admiring the problem" to actually working to disrupt the status quo of discrimination in our schools and society - and perhaps more important, how will I gauge my progress?

Last week Camilla Greene and I co-facilitated the first half of a CFG seminar with the staff of a soon-to-be opened Afro-

centric charter high school. I was the only white person present at our three-day session. The conversation was different from the conversations I've grown accustomed to in the predominantly, or solely white seminars that I usually facilitate.

Camilla and I used many of the same techniques and tools that we usually use, but there was an added layer to last week's conversations. We didn't need to read *Curriculum as Window and Mirror* to drive home the need for students to see themselves in their school's materials and methods. Our framing question for the week was, How can we work as "gap closers" while supporting the development of strong cultural identities for our students? Our question brought together concerns about "closing the gap" but linked them inextricably with the need to counter the biased cultural messages children of color are served on a daily basis by our dominant white culture. There was an implicit

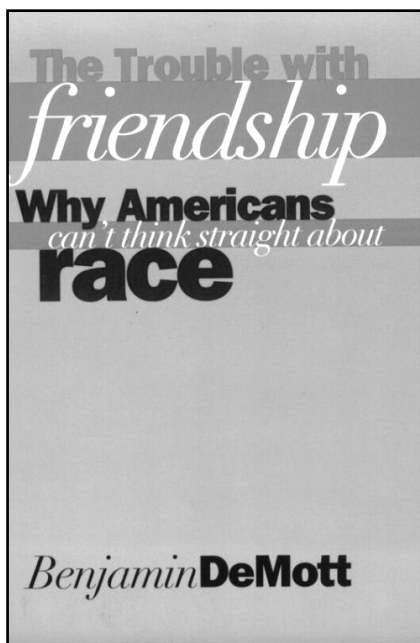
recognition that students needed to master the mechanics of the "tests" and master "the game" without getting caught up in the deficit-based rhetoric that is designed to keep them in their place.

In our CFG we have never discussed the relationship between closing the gap and our students' cultural identities, however we've made a commitment to have ongoing, explicit conversations about equity in general and racism in particular. Consequently, at our most recent meeting, we listened to a song from this year's Tony-award-winning-musical, Avenue Q. The song is called A Little Bit Racist, and it drives home the point that we are all guilty of biased assumptions based on our differences. As a theatergoer, I am thrilled that a hit show is tackling issues of race and homophobia, but the equation of biases and the promotion of "sameness" as the basis of our potential harmony is disturbing and potentially dangerous.

During our "Audio Rendering" and in our subsequent conversation, members of our CFG wondered whether being a "little bit racist" was like being a "little bit pregnant," and we went on to unpack the differences between having "colorblindness" and embracing diversity as our goal. Members highlighted the word "relax" and the phrase "everyone makes judgements" among others, and we all agreed to disagree with the song's lyrics.

The sameness promoted by Avenue Q is reminiscent of the analysis in *The Trouble with Friendship*, where DeMott debunks what he calls the "orthodoxy of friendship," describing in detail the ways that a celebration of our supposed commonality necessarily leads to a complacency about, or an outright denial of, the systemic racism that still grips our society and defines the lives and opportunities of our citizens of color. When seen in this light, Avenue Q falls into step with a long list of "buddy films,"

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sitcoms and TV commercials that Madison Avenue dishes up regularly to reassure well-meaning whites, like me, that racism was laid to rest by the Civil Rights legislation of the sixties.

DeMott goes on to say that this denial of racism's existence as a foundation of our society leads to a shying away from the labeling of our society as a caste society. Relegating problems to the realm of individual differences between "prejudiced" individuals shifts the responsibility for dealing with those problems to those particular individuals and allows the majority of whites to see ourselves as blameless and powerless.

Coupled with these images of friendship and sameness are stories of philanthropy, from the donations of super-wealthy whites, to the business partnerships that place white mentors in classrooms of color. What we don't see in these media messages is any recognition of the efforts of leaders of color. We don't see Geoffrey Canada's efforts in Harlem, or Robert Moses's work in the Algebra Project. Instead, the loudly unspoken question, the question of fault or blame for the ongoing achievement gap, looms large. If these white philanthropists offer a guarantee of a free ride to college to "these" kids and "they" don't graduate, whose fault is it? If all of us white teachers, with our good intentions and hard work, aren't closing the gap, who's to blame? Is it the kids, their parents, their culture? How much of this message gets internalized by students of color? And how much of this message do we internalize, despite our good intentions?

These questions of blame used to make me uncomfortable and for the most part I have challenged them silently, contenting myself with what I've called a "proactive" approach with students and their families. But now I'm thinking that in order to be truly proactive, I need to be much more explicit. With all students, I think I need to openly acknowledge

the existence of a current caste system based on race and its relationship to the achievement gap. With colleagues, I need to ask the questions that DeMott's analysis points to, asking whether I/we really believe that equal opportunities exist and that we've dealt with racism as a systematic form of oppression. Along the same lines, I need to recognize the ways that I've promoted a shallow form of racial unity, one based on the kinds of "friendship" or tolerance that DeMott outlines.

Concretely, I'll be introducing norms with the "Willing to be Disturbed" section of Margaret Wheatley's book *Turning to One Another*. Using this text and The Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger has helped groups I've worked with recently move beyond the level of polite discourse into safe but principled, probing conversations.

I'll also be using an article called *Educating African American Children: Credibility at a Crossroads* by Brenda Campbell Jones and Franklin Campbell Jones, Ed.D. The authors raise questions about our system's loss of legitimacy, a loss that continues to grow each day that our leaders make speeches about equity and our institutions, including schools, continue to discriminate against poor children and children of color.

At the beginning of this piece I wondered how I would know if I was making progress as a white ally in the struggle for equity. Now I think that one way I'll know is by my shift in framing questions. I think all of my work should be based on the intersection of "gap closing" and healthy cultural identities for kids, regardless of the racial make-up of the adult or student populations where I'm working. ■

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Making Learning Visible...

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damental features of group learning that they shared at the MLV Institute:

1. The members of learning groups include adults as well as children.
2. Documenting children's learning processes helps to make learning visible and shapes the learning that takes place.
3. Members of learning groups are engaged in the emotional and aesthetic as well as the intellectual dimensions of learning.
4. The focus of learning in groups extends beyond the learning of individuals to create a collective body of knowledge.

In his opening remarks at the Institute, Steve Seidel said he hoped we would leave with more questions than those we had when we arrived and I, for one, was very successful when measured by this standard! As I look over my notes, the pages are filled with quotes, wonderings and a trove of questions. I'll close here with just one, and I hope you'll share your thoughts, questions and experiences in response to it: What happens at the intersection of group learning and documentation? ■

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For more information about these principles, and the MLV project, visit Project Zero at pzweb.harvard.edu
For more information about Reggio Emilia Schools, visit zerosei.comune.re.it