

# Because of the Kids: Facing Racial and Cultural Differences in Schools

Book Review by Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

The central perspectives advanced in *Because of the Kids: Facing Racial and Cultural Differences in Schools* are:

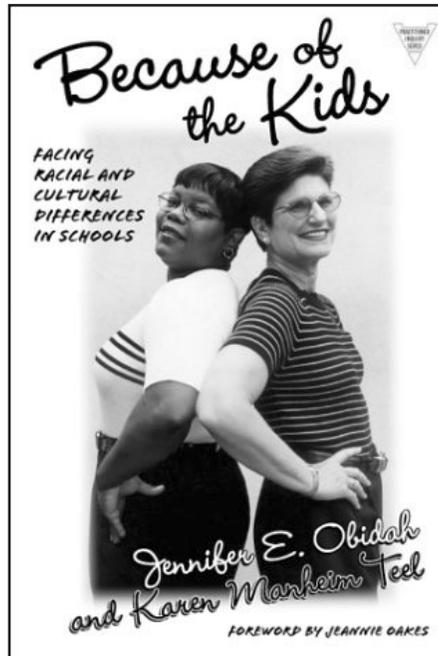
- Teacher beliefs, intentions and personalities are the most powerful factor in the determination of individual student success or failure, surpassing the role of the curriculum or other structural factors in schools.
- White teachers, because of their unconscious racial and cultural biases, may in fact be unwittingly undermining the success of their students of color.
- Given the disproportionate number of white teachers responsible for the education of poor children and children of color, and the profound impact of their behavior and beliefs on these students, white teachers have a special role to play in the disruption of the achievement gap.

Armed with this framework, *Because of the Kids* traces the story of the journey two teacher researchers, Jennifer E. Obidah and Karen Manheim Teel, took over the course of a three-year inquiry into Karen's classroom interactions with her students. In their book both authors offer readers a candid view of their rocky road to a deeper understanding of the multilayered cross-cultural dynamics in their professional and personal relationship, Karen's relationships with her students of color, and her ability to effectively deliver instruction to them.

This collaborative inquiry began when Karen approached Jennifer while the two were graduate students at Berkeley. As a previously successful white teacher of mostly white, middle class adolescents, Karen was deeply troubled by her later less-successful efforts in support of inner-city African-American youth. Karen knew that Jennifer, a West Indian immigrant and teacher-researcher, had a reputation as a successful teacher of inner-city youth and consequently invited Jennifer into her classroom on a regular basis to

observe and analyze the disconnect that Karen felt existed between her and her new students.

In the study, the two teachers met biweekly to compare notes and monthly to "break bread" and deepen their broader friendship. Jennifer also administered student questionnaires,



held student focus groups and conducted individual student interviews as part of the data collection process.

The power in this account lies in the honest exchange of views between the two teachers. Their struggles and their ability to continue working despite their considerable personal pain are a testimony of their mutual commitment "because of the kids."

The description of the risks involved when people of different racial/cultural backgrounds engage in frank conversation about behaviors and assumptions that cut deeply into their own self-concept is powerful. For example, when Karen writes about her frustration at learning that in doing her best she has not only missed the mark, but also hurt her students' feelings and chances of success, her distress is palatable.

Specifically, Karen designed a simulation about feudal empires for her history class and designated student roles, i.e. barbarians, slaves etc. When a student balked at being "called a barbarian," Karen was upset with his "attitude" and unaware of her role in their conflict.

In Karen's words:

"I was convinced of the 'rightness' of the activity ... and had taken time to prepare it with the students best interests in mind ... Role-playing ... was a way of adhering to advice from the educational literature ... How could such a strategy go wrong? When students' responses did not follow my expectations, I shifted the blame: It was the students' fault (p. 53)."

The same situation from Jennifer's standpoint:

"In the incident we named "Why You Call Me a Barbarian" ... initially Karen's actions were actually working against her own good intentions students were exhibiting undesirable (to Karen) behavior, even though their behavior was in direct response to Karen's actions, which did not take into account her students' racial and cultural identities (p. 55)"

As a result of the teachers' collaboration over time, Karen was able to understand and change her behaviors. She continued to use creative lessons and methods, but did not assign roles that could be received as labels that were demeaning to her students. She stopped labeling every student disagreement as "kids getting an attitude" and examined her own practices more closely. She became a reflective practitioner around issues of equity.

In another incident, Jennifer writes about a painful experience and being fed up with Karen and her unwillingness to be straight about how she feels, what her reservations are about receiving feedback, etc. Their collaborative relationship grinds to a screeching halt

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public our inferences as members of groups. In another section he addresses intervening in groups and articulates clearly the ways in which group members can express emotions so that it increases the effectiveness of the group's work. This section had great appeal to me personally because emotional energy is so powerful and has so much potential for creating conditions for doing great work with a group. The stickler is that power, as defined by Ken McLeod in *Wake-Up to Your Life*, is the ability to be present in intentional action. This is why facilitation is both cognitively and emotionally demanding.

#### So What? Now What?

The biggest challenge for each of us as coaches, facilitators, and human beings is to act congruently with our espoused

core values.

Here are two other sets of core values that Schwarz describes as a contrast to the Mutual Learning Model that he espouses.

#### Set One:

1. Achieve your goals.
2. Maximize winning and minimize loss.
3. Minimize generating or expressing negative feelings.
4. Act according to what you consider rational.

Underlying assumptions: I understand the situation. I have pure motives. My negative feelings are justified.

#### Set Two:

1. Everyone participates in defining the purpose.
2. Everyone wins and no one loses.

3. Express your feelings.
4. Suppress your intellectual reasoning.

Underlying assumptions: In order for people to learn, be involved and committed, people must come to the right answer by themselves. The group does not want my help, but I have the right answer.

Before going to your next facilitation experience, use Schwarz's conceptual framework and inquire into your own core values and the assumptions that underlie them. Is there a connection between your "talk" and your "walk"? This is a recurrent question that must be posed as our groups and our work evolve. ■

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#### Because of the Kids... (continued from page 5)

when Jennifer decides to publish her work in the study, her dissertation, as part of her plans to enter academia and Karen tries to block Jennifer's plans. Karen begins the exchange by demanding a co-authoring credit and the kid gloves get dropped. Jennifer's feelings of risk and pain as she's being threatened by Karen are devastating.

"I was being encouraged by my professors to publish my dissertation as a natural aspect of making myself marketable for the profession ... Karen felt disillusioned by my actions and her hurt led to her being a threat to the publication of my dissertation (p. 74)."

As I read this part of the book, I found myself wondering about the risks that colleagues of color take each time they form professional and personal relationships with white colleagues like me ...

However, just when it looks like a legal battle is about to heat up between the two women, Karen apologizes and

the collaboration continues.

Later, with the help of an interview with Lisa Delpit, both teachers are able to understand the role of their cultural differences in the ways they define conflict and either embrace or avoid it. Here's a sample of Lisa Delpit's analysis:

"And in your case Jennifer...you expect, if somebody has something on their mind, they bring it up...And that was one of the things that I think caused you all some conflict, because you're expecting if something's on Karen's mind, Karen's gonna say it. (p. 84)"

Meanwhile, Karen believed, according to her remarks to Lisa Delpit, that a good relationship was "one with no conflict (p. 84)."

Throughout the text the implications of the lessons the teachers learn about communication, assumptions, and their impact on adult and student interaction are clearly described

and should be of real value for all teachers concerned with closing the achievement gap in our classrooms and schools. But the broader value of this study lies in its lessons for anyone interested in the ways we negotiate relationships across the persistent racial divide that hobbles our progress as teachers. The experience chronicled by these two educators addresses a gap in the current literature about the multilayered impact of race on teaching and learning in diverse classrooms. I applaud the honesty, courage, and persistence of these authors and I think their explicit conversations about things usually left unsaid, out there "on the skinny branches," offer many lessons for those of us working in Critical Friends Groups. ■

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