Connections
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Listen In on Our Courageous Conversations About Race Book Chat
Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania, for the Book Chat group

On March 2nd, armed with our agreed upon norms, 53 of us began a text-based reflective journey with an electronic “Block Party” about these quotes from the preface of Courageous Conversations About Race (chat members are called Blockers in the chat publically, but I have removed names because individual confidentiality is one of our norms).

“It is precisely because few educators have explicitly investigated the taboo intersection of race and achievement that we offer this book. Our rationale is quite simple: We will never eliminate the racial achievement gap unless we have conversations about race.” (page xiv)

Well, this is my attempt to engage in these conversations. I don’t know if this quote reflects the truth but I am willing to spend a significant amount of time exploring the intersection because thus far it doesn’t seem that my strategies have worked well to reduce the connection between race and achievement. Perhaps by having these conversations unforeseen ideas will emerge in the area of “what I don’t know that I don’t know.” So, it’s worth the effort to me.

All the quotes are strongly stated assertions: “we will never…” “just believe me.” etc. As prompts to operate from, I think they can successfully frame these conversations in ways that are a healthy break from the “business as usual” discourse of schools. They are for me promising working hypotheses rather than “the truth.”

“White people, emotionally moved by what they have heard, often approach him (Glenn) at the end of these seminars and ask, ‘So what do I believe me.’” (page xiv)

As a white ally, I feel stung by the “truth”/pain of a colleague of color’s experience when I have to reckon with my piece of responsibility, my role in causing the pain. In the heat of the moment, I may not know what to say. In my discomfort, I may welcome the chance to just move on as if nothing has been said, or happened. What I am learning, and it is an ongoing process of learning, is that it is precisely at those uncomfortable moments that I need to slow down and acknowledge what was said/happened and to own and truly know how to respond… that I need to think about it, or talk more with colleagues about it. As a coach/facilitator, I am working on holding the space & time for those adchemically intense and awkward conversations because I know that it is only by working in this risky zone that we can move forward. Concretely, this means changing the agenda and being willing to go beyond the tried and true steps of the protocol, if the protocol’s not working. Based on conversations C and I have had in our work, I know that this willingness to “hold the space” is part of her definition of having her back. -D

“Courageous Conversation, as a strategy, begins with the premise that the truly qualified, educational leaders collectively view themselves and the schooling enterprise to be inherently non-racist. In fact their tightly held beliefs and understandings regarding the significance of race make it difficult for teachers to com-prehend, examine, and - (continued on page 19)

population are Indonesia and India.) Students who dress or appear as Muslims may struggle with teasing or threats from peers or even teachers. However, many Muslims do not dress in an obvious way, and their inner struggles are just as painful. Consider some of these questions to help identify how you can best support Muslims in your classroom.

• Are they afraid to come to school?
• Are they scared to practice their religion in school (via dress, prayer, reading scripture, etc.)?
• What accommodation can you offer?
• Do they have family or friends who are affected by war?
• Are they suffering from fatigue, depression or lack of sleep with international family?
• Are they non-participating in discussion about current events, religion, or culture, or do they prefer to avoid attention?
• Are they scared that their perceived connection to current events, or their opinions about current events, will be held against them by teachers or principals?
• Have they been threatened or assaulted by fellow students or teachers?
• Are there students in the classroom who have expressed biased opinions or made negative remarks?
• How can you support those students’ learning and growth?

Even if there are no Muslim students in your classroom, the strategies and the gaps in our understanding that can introduce new ideas and perspectives into the classroom, like having a guest speaker, such as a Muslim teacher or a representative from a local mosque or Islamic school.

Finally, I’d like to share my personal connection to this concern. Two years ago, while I was working at the Winter Meeting in Denver, Colorado, I received a phone call from my husband, who was distraught. Our mosque had been the target of an early-morning bombing attempt, which thankfully only caused minor damage and hurt no one. The bomber was by all definitions a terrorist, as the act was designed to bring fear to our community. And it was frightening, the bomber left a burned Qur’an behind. Many positive things came out of this incident. Other religious communities rallied to our side to stand against hate in our town, and our relationships with those groups were further strengthened. However, when my husband was interviewed several times on local radio about the incident as a represen-}

Resources

• Islamicity: www.islamicity.com/education
• Understanding Islam and the Muslims: The Muslim Family and World Peace, by T.J Winter and John Williams
• The Vision of Islam: Visions of Reality, Understanding Religions, by Sachiko Murata and William Chittick
• What Islam Did For Us: Understanding Islam’s Contribution to Western Civilization, by Tim Wallace-Murphy
• The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity, by Seyed Hossein Nast
• Silent No More: Confronting America’s False Images of Islam, by Paul Findley (former Congressman, D-Ill. 1961-1983)
• Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism, by Omid Safi
• Why I Am a Muslim by Asema Goll Hanan
• Council on American Islamic Relations: www.cair.org

Write to me, and I will share this with you.

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An Interview with Dr. Paul C. Gorski
Camilla Greene, New Hampshire

Dr. Gorski is an assistant professor at Hamline University in Minnesota, and is founder of Edchange, described on its website as being “dedicated to diversity, equity, and justice in schools and society. We act to shape school and community actions, so that all people, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, (dis)ability, language, or religion, have equitable opportunities to thrive and achieve free from oppression.” Dr. Gorski is also known as a frequent critic of the work of Dr. Ruby Payne, author of A Framework for Understanding Poverty, and her espoused and practiced theory of poverty.

How would you describe yourself? Activist, educator, writer in that order. My background is community activism and organizing and it was through activism that I came into education.

When did you first become aware of classism? I don’t know that I became aware of classism as a system until my teens. I was brought up in a middle-class family, had a middle-class education, and didn’t notice that the world around me was anything but a middle-class world. I didn’t ask who people were poor. Very few people talk about why poverty exists in the wealthy country on the planet. For whose benefit does poverty exist? For whose benefit is the world around me working as it works right now? It’s only when I started asking big questions about the world around me. In school we would talk about what it was like to be poor. But we didn’t ask why people were poor. Very few people talk about why poverty exists in the wealthy country on the planet. For whose benefit does poverty exist? For whose benefit is the world around me working as it works right now? It’s only when I started asking big questions about the world around me.

What have you been able to do to interrupt classism in your work? I have fallen into poverty and do not think about a legacy. I certainly do not have it all figured out. How in your own life have you not fallen into the trap of “the allure of the path of least resistance”? I have fallen and do engage in reflective work in preparation for understanding institutionalized classism.

rectify the very ways in which race dramatically impacts achievement” (page xxiv)

I have used this quote to help teachers become open to the “race” conversation. I find that the teachers with whom I work find it difficult (as most whites do) to look at race. They go first to class/poverty, family conditions, individual characteristics, etc. I have some teachers who proudly share that they are “color-blind” in their classrooms. Given these experiences, I think that the quote is accurate in that most educators do not easily embrace conversations focused on race.

I read this quote in my research, and it became the starting point for my work.

What would you like to be your legacy? That is something I do not think about. I turn 35 tomorrow, so it feels odd to think about a legacy. Maybe my legacy, at this point, would be about telling people together, people immediately around me. I try to work collaboratively, pull people in, build movements. My legacy would be organizing, drawing people together who have resisted the temptation to soften the conversation about racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, imperialism, and other oppressions.

To what extent do you believe educators are capable of examining their own class-based prejudices? First, I should say that the problem of classism is not specific to educators. We are all socialized to buy into the myth of meritocracy and consumer culture, and to be measured by what we have rather than by who we are. Consequently, it is hard to wonder why.

In terms of a process for understanding racism and classism, I started seeing systemic and purposeful inequitable conditions once I started asking big questions about the world around me. In school we would talk about what it was like to be poor. But we didn’t ask why people were poor. Very few people talk about why poverty exists in the wealthy country on the planet. For whose benefit does poverty exist? For whose benefit is the world around me working as it works right now? It’s only when I started asking big questions about the world around me. In school we would talk about what it was like to be poor. But we didn’t ask why people were poor. Very few people talk about why poverty exists in the wealthy country on the planet. For whose benefit does poverty exist? For whose benefit is the world around me working as it works right now? It’s only when I started asking big questions about the world around me.

What have you been able to do to interrupt classism in your work? I have fallen into poverty and do not think about a legacy. I certainly do not have it all figured out. How in your own life have you not fallen into the trap of “the allure of the path of least resistance”? I have fallen and do engage in reflective work in preparation for understanding institutionalized classism.

How do your students describe you? “Politically radical.” I do not see myself as politically radical. “Passionate.” “Engaging.” They would describe me as an activist, and that is threatening to many of them, most of whom are teachers.

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