OPINION

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Test-obsessed instruction leaves little room to teach race

Common Core pressures make it difficult to educate students about social justice

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The shooting tragedy in Charleston, South Carolina, combined with the alarming clashes in the past year in Ferguson, Missouri; Baltimore; and McKinney, Texas, have forced conversations about race on a national citizenry that has long preferred looking the other way. Similar reflections about social justice, however, have been almost entirely absent from U.S. schoolrooms. As politicians and parents vehemently debate the role of the Common Core, teachers and students remain largely silent about the roles of skin color on one's learning experience.

More than ever, race as a construct of civic and personal identity is critical to talk about with children. Pretending that racial stressors do not exist in their minds and daily experiences is to pretend that their learning is not affected by their social and emotional states. The increasingly diverse makeup of U.S. classrooms means that students will wrestle with these questions of race whether educators guide them or not.

But introducing such discourse into classrooms requires planning and administrative support. For most public schools, the testing mandates of the Common Core standards, which focus on English language arts and math, make these kinds of dialogues nearly impossible. According to David Kirkland, an associate professor of education at New York University who researches English education and urban studies, standardization, accountability and high-stakes testing have "swallowed up a lot of real estate in the school day" that might otherwise be allocated to talking with students about real-world problems.

Too much time is mandated for drills and test taking at the expense of actually educating the child. A 2013 study (PDF) from the American Federation of Teachers found that students in heavily tested grades spend 20 to 50 hours a year taking standardized exams and another 60 to 110 hours in preparations.

The standards themselves are not necessarily nefarious; the Common Core suggests reading challenging texts by black authors such as Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright. There are no standards, however, emphasizing social and emotional learning or self-identity. While the fates of schools and teachers reside in their test score results, there is nothing to encourage — and everything to discourage — nuanced discussions of race and social status.

Not allowing children to wrestle with labels of identity and vocalize their feelings of belonging can isolate them, depriving them of the tools to negotiate how society sees them. It can also suggest that inequality is something that exists only in the past. Brigitte Fielder, an assistant professor of comparative literature who teaches courses in race and gender studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, finds that her well-intentioned undergraduate students arrive at college without the "tools or the language to engage in antiracist discourse. It's not that they don't want to talk about these things. They have never had to do it before." Many students come from segregated or cloistered environments in which race and racism are not openly discussed.

> **"Students of all backgrounds need more time to look up from their standardized tests and actually talk to one another."**

Fielder's observations are consistent with a 2014 study on millennials and bias (PDF) conducted by MTV Strategic Insights and David Binder Research. The survey concluded that more than 70 percent of millennials believe they are postracial and wish to live in a colorblind society. Although they feel that discussing bias is key to reducing prejudice, only 20 percent of respondents admit they would be comfortable engaging in that conversation. Only 37 percent were brought up in families that talked about race.

The postracial or colorblind mindset ignores the unequal conditions under which the social construct of race emerges. Fielder explained, "Whereas privileged children can be protected from the discomfort of these conversations, historically, parents of black children have needed to talk about these issues as a matter of safety." These personal narratives are essential for all students to hear, regardless of racial identity, so that they become

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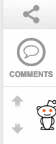

aware of classmates' realities. The next generation cannot work toward a more equitable society without a shared understanding of how white privilege operates and how institutional racism persists.

Fortunately, more schools are emphasizing social and emotional learning, or SEL, a curriculum of skills to negotiate relationships, empathy and decision-making, which researchers say accounts for 50 percent of overall learning.

The Fieldston Lower School in the Bronx in New York City, for instance, recently began folding conversations about personal and racial identity into the daily flow of learning. The program gathers third-, fourth- and fifth-graders into affinity groups by race or ethnicity to discuss their life experiences. While the plan has spurred hand wringing by some parents for highlighting rather than smoothing over the differences within the school community, Fieldston's quest to bring personal identities into daily discourse appears to be a worthwhile endeavor. But it is also an independent school not completely beholden to state requirements.

But public schools have options for facilitating authentic dialogue as well. Take the New York Performance Standards Consortium network of schools. These 28 open-admission public schools have higher graduation, college attendance and college retention rates than city, state and national averages. The pedagogical design of these schools empowers students and teachers to discuss critical social issues.

These schools carry waivers from New York state that allow them to substitute student portfolios and oral presentations for required state exams. Students engage in a research process similar to a dissertation's and must defend their ideas before a peer-review panel. In preparation for these summative assessments, students learn to pose critical questions, negotiate divergent opinions and cull evidence to support their claims. Teachers facilitate seminars rooted in student inquiry, during which students explore interpersonal ideas. At the Urban Academy, for example, faculty members engage in a weekly three-hour meeting and professional development session to train in this inquiry-led approach.

Although this alternative model of instruction has been adopted by other schools in Vermont and Kentucky, the autonomy to act independent of standardization is a crucial component in the program's success. These conversations are not easy to begin, but students of all backgrounds need more time to look up from their standardized tests and actually talk to one another.

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