

Voices From the Inside: Jackie Roehl

I teach in Edina, Minnesota, a first-ring Minneapolis suburb dominated by White, affluent residents and high-performing schools. When the school district made a Commitment to ensure racial equity for all Edina Public School students, some parents, students, and even employees questioned that decision, wondering why we needed to explore race, racism, and Whiteness when our schools are consistently ranked among the top in the state and the nation. While it's true that our district boasts high graduation rates and advanced placement (AP) scores, the reality was that we suffered a significant race-based achievement gap and racial predictability in enrollment in our AP classes.

Fortunately, many community members and educators embrace the idea that to end racism in the United States and close the racial achievement gap, teachers and students must explicitly and courageously discuss issues of race, racism, and Whiteness. Even schools like mine, with a student population that is 82% White and a staff of nearly all White teachers, need to promote courageous conversations and act on equity issues. Closing the racial achievement gap in the United States is a moral and ethical imperative. Schools will do little to change the racial predictability of achievement without a major shift in teaching approaches and active social justice work. Edina is beginning to shift, and working with PEG influenced recent reforms at Edina High School that impacted teachers, students, and systems.

Having a teaching staff embrace culturally relevant pedagogy is key to closing the racial achievement gap. Teachers have long been trained to honor diversity but have also been encouraged to teach all students in the same way in the name of equality. Teachers must understand that equity is not equality because students have individual needs in terms of process and assessment--just like the vegetables in my garden have individual needs, with my tomatoes needing more water than my onions. Success in the garden comes from caring for each plant according to its needs; success in schools comes from giving each student the specific instruction she or he needs to reach high intellectual performance.

The last 8 years of my teaching career have been marked by a fierce belief that all students can achieve at high levels. Although I was committed to social justice in the past, my teaching philosophy evolved through my work with PEG and The National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA). Prior to 2004, my English classroom focused on whole-class discussions about literature, where a few verbal students dominated the lessons and entertained their classmates. Although I called these discussions Socratic and believed I was teaching my students critical thinking skills, I realized that mostly my White students were reflecting my White Culture back to me, and that my students of color were left out of that classroom discourse altogether. Exposure to the beliefs and practices of culturally relevant teaching helped me change my pedagogy.

I first began my journey to culturally relevant teaching with NUA and its seminars, which emphasize high intellectual performance for all students through explicit teaching strategies that stress high operational practices and lessons that consider students' cultural frames of reference.

However, a piece of my pedagogy puzzle remained missing until my school district became involved with PEG in 2009. PEG seminars filled in the missing philosophical piece that is as important as having new strategies to try in class. PEG's emphasis on having courageous conversations that isolate race, and specifically, a study of critical race theory helped me reach the place that I am today--a teacher who not only incorporates culturally relevant strategies but also understands the importance of critically examining the systems of racism that prevent some students from achieving to their highest potential in school.

PEG's Beyond Diversity Workshops, equity team seminars, and CARE trainings gave my colleagues and me a framework to examine the individual and systemic practices at Edina High School that limit student achievement. Debriefing equity walks allowed the team to discuss systemic issues in our school: the high frequency of Black students in our school's alternative high school, which is housed in our basement; our only Black male employees working in support positions such as security of cafeteria duty; and our Black students avoiding the school's main lunchroom during the lunch hours. As a team, we practiced the Courageous Conversations Protocol to discuss not only these equity walks but also classroom observations of focal students of color. We discussed the strategies that we could use for students who were so quiet in class that they were flying under the radar as well as those students who were engaging with the curriculum in a manner that did not fit our school's traditional White culture.

Before working with PEG, teacher conversations around classroom observations were staid and focused on the positives. Now, CARE team members are starting to speak honestly with each other about areas that need improvement regarding students of color in the classroom. These difficult conversations were the missing piece for our school to really begin systemic transformations.

In addition to the CARE team members personally changing their pedagogy, the team wanted to impact the entire staff, so we started sharing the strategies and philosophies with colleagues through equity seminars. For the last 2 years, the CARE team used staff development time and even former faculty meeting time to present to the full staff the philosophies and strategies learned from PEG and NUA. We placed an equity lens over all staff development discussions--from literacy to homework to assessment. We even used specific readings and films from PEG seminars with our staff. For example, one 3-hour session on critical race theory and the film, *The House We Live In*, impacted many staff members, especially examining Whiteness as property, and pushed them to understand the importance of equity work at Edina High School.

Understanding Critical race theory was a significant reason behind our school taking another step on our equity journey--incorporating a study of Critical race theory into our sophomore English classes. English teachers felt that our district's mission to give all learners the "ethical values necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing, culturally diverse, global society" could not be fully met without explicit discussions of race, racism, and Whiteness. In fact, our largely White student body at our largely White school would be significantly underprepared to succeed in the world beyond the classroom if we didn't explicitly teach them about race, racism, and Whiteness before they ventured out in a world that is significantly more racially diverse than the community

in which they grow up.

To that end, sophomore English classes used the theme, "The Counterstory," to frame the curriculum this past year so students could critically examine perspectives that are often left out of the canon. English teachers also encouraged students to examine the role that power has in the stories studied to get a sense of the ways Whiteness silences some voices and amplifies others. Using the Courageous Conversations Protocol with our students, we were able to guide students through difficult discussions of race, racism, and Whiteness. As a culminating essay, students used critical race theory to analyze two texts read in class.

In just 3 short years, the discussions and Written reflections about race and racism in our English 10 classes have grown immensely. Three years ago, teachers across the school had little direct discussion of race. I recall the moment 3 years ago when I told my class, "Let's get a Black student's perspective" and many White students yelled at me in response: "You can't say that That's racist. Then, 2 years ago, English 10 incorporated a 3-week unit on race and racism to accompany Richard Wright's memoir, *Black Boy*. I am ashamed to admit that despite the fact that *Black Boy* has been in the English 10 Curriculum for 10 years, teachers previously reduced the book to a discussion of hunger and poverty, with race only briefly mentioned as part of Wright's cultural identity.

However, 2 years ago, students started to explicitly discuss race with their personal racial awakening stories and an analysis of the narratives of Blackness and Whiteness in Wright's memoir and other short selections of fiction and nonfiction. These racial awakening stories allowed students to explore the moment they first recognized race, and especially allowed White students--some for the first time--to think about Whiteness as a race. Through text-to-self connections, students were also able to discuss how Whiteness was showing up in the classrooms and hallways of Edina High School.

Even though English teachers have been able to evolve our discussions of race, racism, and Whiteness over the years to an in-depth study, some students, teachers, and parents still question why students in a school that is 82% White need to be exposed to such a course of study. Fortunately, the English teachers can courageously explain to parents and students that White students also need help exploring issues of race and racism because their own White racial identity is invisible to many, and they reduce racism to something that happened in the past to other people. Since a few vocal parents find my commitment to expanding the racial consciousness of my students troubling, parent-teacher conference days are draining and demanding. Although I have some parents who thank me for opening their children's eyes to issues of racial justice, the few parents who complain stick with me for days. One mother said that studying racism is OK, but she didn't want students to learn about Whiteness until college. Another parent asked why the race unit didn't include a discussion of the racism that White males feel from groups such as the Black Panthers. Other questions and comments are more veiled: "Wouldn't students be better served with a classic rather than *Black Boy*?" or "My daughter is looking forward to a new unit."

Although questioning parents are all too common in the education profession, answering questions about race takes a special skill set. Because of my PEG training, I was able to stay

centered on the compass and explain the beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and actions behind the English Curriculum.

Although incorporating a unit on race and racism was a good start compared to where my school was a few years ago, the English Department felt that educational equity could not be achieved as long as we had systemic curricular gaps between enriched and regular classes. Black and Hispanic students were overrepresented in regular classes, while White and Asian students were overrepresented in enriched classes. Although isolating race was key in our decision, we also noticed that girls were greatly overrepresented in enriched English classes, leaving overall demographics of the leveled classes skewed by race and gender.

The English Department felt the best way to address this curriculum gap was to eliminate the leveling of courses and provide the enriched curriculum to all students. Next year, this new course will launch with 12 English teachers, one special education teacher, and one English language learners teacher, working together to ensure that all students have the opportunity for a successful enriched experience. Specific structures are in place for flexible grouping based on choice books and tiered assignments that provide multiple ways for students to meet the state standards.

Overall, educators must understand that despite the fact that discussing issues of race, racism, and Whiteness is uncomfortable, they need to experience that discomfort to effect real change from the status quo that leaves so many students woefully behind. Our current system even leaves White students behind in terms of being prepared for a racially diverse global society. We need teachers who are uncomfortable with the racial predictability of enrollment in honors courses, of identification in gifted and talented programs, of academic achievement. We need teachers to be uncomfortable enough with the way things are to actively and courageously fight for a more equitable and more just education for our students.

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