

Colorblindness in Education

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Contemporary Art and Critical Pedagogy: Issues in Identity, Race, and
Multiculturalism

Professor Desai and Professor Hamlin

In this essay I will evaluate how resisting colorblindness in education contributes toward the fight against racism. The term “colorblindness” is a common response in attempting to reject racism. Colorblindness is a lens in which people use in effort to treat all individuals equally despite their race. Those who claim they are racially colorblind are asserting they do not see skin color, thus they treat everyone equally.

It may seem that colorblindness would contribute toward the fight against racism at first. For instance, colorblindness can be helpful in dismantling surface level forms of discrimination, such as hiring a white person over a person of color despite qualifications, or refusing a person of color a lease for an apartment. However, “it can be perverse, for example, when it stands in the way of taking account difference in order to help those in need” (Delgado, 2012, pp. 26).

Colorblindness, when standing in the way of justice, contributes to racism by avoiding conflict and structural change in society. In Lee Anne Bell’s article, “Storytelling Project Model,” she notes that in Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous speech, he dreams of a society where colorblindness means the eradication of racism to tackle barriers for people of color, rather than one that ignores racism itself. She also states that “King’s vision of a color-blind future in which barriers to children of color are eliminated, requires that we see and account for race in order to create institutions and practices that do not replicate patterns of racial inequality that have been rendered as normative” (Bell, 2010, pp. 15). Colorblindness, as it is practiced now, ultimately fails at seeing race and recognizing racism. Thus colorblindness is a barrier to racial progress.

Race itself is a social construct considering racial categories have no valid genetic base (Pollock, 2008, pp. xx) This negates the arguments that humans differ biologically or intellectually from race to race. In the film, “Race: The Power of an Illusion,” (2003) we see high school students conducting an experiment that analyzes the biology of each classmate, by taking

samples of DNA. This curriculum assignment does not only teach students about how to examine the chemical makeup of individuals, but through the results, the students realize that race identifiers, such as color of skin, hair texture, and eye shape, do not show any correlation biologically. Therefore, race is not biologically grounded, but rather social constructed. This film reveals the early assumptions of biological correlations between races, dating back to slavery in America when whites used this belief as a justification for being the dominant race. This false concept, that people of color are biologically inferior, inadvertently affects the way socially dominant groups oppress socially inferior groups today.

Racism is more than prejudice against someone of a different race. Racism is a system of interpersonal, social, and institutional patterns of Whites as the dominant group, benefitting at the expense of other races, including African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans and Arab Americans (Bell, 2010, pp. 13). We must understand this concept in order to pursue anti-hegemonic movements.

Racism is endemic in American life and education, therefore, colorblindness in education will only perpetuate racism. In order to counteract racism, educators must invest in teaching anti-racist education. Schools often push to instill multiculturalism into curriculum, however multicultural education does not look at discrimination like anti-racist education does. Multicultural education usually focuses on individualism and celebrates cultures using food and festivals. This is only a surface level interaction with race. In anti-racist education, teachers should not only be willing to teach units of study on various cultural backgrounds, but they should integrate elements of various cultures into each unit. Furthering this practice, teachers should encourage social change by empowering their students to enhance the community they live in with anti-racist notions. In anti-racist education, teachers use knowledge to empower

students to change their lives and the lives of others suffering from inequality (Au, 2014, pp. 10-12). The practice of anti-racist education rebukes colorblindness. Students who are conscious of color, historically and presently, will critically examine power structures and pursue change.

Dipti Desai examines the implications of colorblindness in public schools in her article “The Challenge of New Colorblind Racism in Art Education” (2010). Desai argues that art education should address racial inequalities in a time where “the majority of teachers are white, middle class, and female; the student body is racially diverse and the rapidly changing demographics point to an increase in students of color; and students of color are more at risk of failing in our schools” (Desai, 2010, pp. 22). Desai critiques multiculturalism in schools due to their surface level approach to race and seeks to instill a critical perspective through anti-bias art education practices. By examining the concept of race through work by contemporary artists of color, students can “begin the process of thinking critically about how our experiences are shaped by our social position, which is always informed by history” (Desai, 2010, pp. 25). These artists have a radical, informative approach to race. Similarly, art students should examine visual culture, which continues to produce colorblind racism by normalizing images of cultural diversity. This type of critical analysis through art is in effort to counteract colorblindness in schools, contributing to the fight against racism (Desai, 2010, pp. 23).

Multicultural education in schools is a good first step in the fight to end racism, however, schools must further their efforts by integrating multicultural histories and practices into all units of curriculum. Furthermore, schools can empower students to evoke social change by referencing contemporary artists or examining visual culture. For all of this to occur, colorblindness must be absent. Colorblindness perpetuates racism and the resist for structural change in society. In order to end racism, colorblindness must not exist.

References

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