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**An Essay Review of
*High Schools, Race, and America's Future: What Students Can Teach Us about
Morality, Diversity, and Community***

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Blum, L. (2012). *High Schools, Race, and America's Future: What Students Can Teach Us about Morality, Diversity, and Community*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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This unusual and important book documents one of the years in which philosopher Larry Blum of UMass-Boston taught a course on race and racism in a Boston high school. The book grapples thoughtfully with the insights revealed from engaging deeply with diverse youth on their views and experiences around race. Using the tools of his trade, Blum analyzes the interactions in the classroom, the visions that his students offer and their evolving views on racial tensions and dilemmas in American society, historically as well as in their lives today. Blum wrestles throughout this book with a key question: How does one know and make her knowledge available to others, in matters like race and racism – matters that are made of many layers, some of which remain implicit even to many who experience their consequences nonetheless? Blum suggests that in order to know and to teach about social matters like race, we need to use both analytic and experiential tools. Many teachers possess the capacity to use analytic tools, but their experiential position may be complicated: the majority of teachers today tend to be of a different race than most of their students, and specifically new teachers who tend to be white and suburban in black or Hispanic-majority urban schools. If personal identity and experience matter for the types of social knowledge we can have and acquire, as Blum's book powerfully suggests, than it might be productive to start from the recognition of one's limitations in understanding social contexts in which she is a foreigner.

As so many teachers are foreign to their schools – as Blum was in the high school he tells us about– they must engage with the meaning of their outsider status. Being an outsider can mean knowing too little; it can also mean, as in Virginia Wolf’s sense of those who are left out, having other, sometimes unwelcomed knowledge; being an outsider can also signify as it did for Socrates a requirement for knowing, taken on by those who choose to maintain a distance from the norms and practices of the city they inhabit. Such distance can provide an advantage. As Socrates knew, being a foreigner in one’s city is a way to hear its silences, to call out that which commonly remains unnamed.¹ In this sense, philosophers like Blum may aspire to be foreigners, and teachers can use their outsider’s status, which is an outcome of social circumstances they did not themselves create, to become a productive member of the school community into which they have migrated. Blum’s thoughtful discussion of his course on “Race and Racism” suggests one desirable way of doing just that.

Blum seems to prioritize, or give significant weight to experiential knowledge. On page one, Blum quotes his own statement at the beginning of the course that the book documents: “You’ll notice that the class is very diverse. That’s on purpose. I wanted to teach a class that reflects the diversity at the high school” (p. 1). Presumably, students of different racial backgrounds have different perspectives, experiences and ideas about race and racism to offer each other. They might have different readings of the same texts, and they might be willing to share experiences that would shed additional light on these texts. In this course as in other similar educational contexts, persons who experience discrimination are assumed to have acquired certain epistemic advantages as a result of their position and their direct experiences with prejudice, power and oppression.

In addition to personal experience, knowledge about social realities is assumed here to come from intellectual engagement. On page 5 the course is described as being an “intellectually demanding” college-level course. Beyond the experiential aspect then there are also facts – facts of science, history, demography, etc. – which should be taken into account. Those too, though, are read through the lenses of each student’s personal experience, and significantly, they are developed and shared in discussion.

Here is one way to think about how the experiential and analytic ways of knowing can interact. Analyzing social realities presumably can allow for a deeper understanding of their histories, causes and impacts. “The curriculum,” Blum tells us, “would incorporate science, history, current events, and students’ reflections on their own lives” (p. 8). Reflecting on experiential knowledge through a framework made of conceptual, factual and historical dimensions is meant to transform, to elevate the lived knowledge that students have of race and racism – which presumably they experience and embody – into a more structured, formal knowledge of the processes and practices in which this experience is couched. In this sense, there is a way to combine received, subjective, constructed and connected forms of knowledge and to develop a fuller understanding of a complex phenomenon like race, and the social responses it engenders. These broader and deeper forms of knowledge offer some instrumental advantages, such as exposure to higher levels of thinking and learning. They are also meant to create a community of learning, which in turn would ideally provide the foundations for a shared social and civic community.

Talking about social realities and learning to analyze our lived experiences in an instructive context can be transformative both intellectually and morally. It can also be very

¹ Wilson, E. (2007). *The death of Socrates*. London, UK: Profile Books.

painful. Toward the end of *The Souls of Black Folk*, in the story ‘On the Coming of John,’ the hero is reunited with his much younger sister, who is trying to decipher his melancholy.

“Long they stood together, peering over the gray unresting water.

‘John,’ she said, ‘does it make every one – unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?’

He paused and smiled. ‘I am afraid it does,’ he said.

‘And, John, are you glad you studied?’

‘Yes,’ came the answer, slowly but positively.

She watched the flickering lights upon the sea, and said thoughtfully, ‘I wish I was unhappy, -- and – and,’ putting both arms about his neck, ‘I think I am, a little, John.’”

Teaching about race and racism can be understood as an ethically complex task, because it is morally necessary to combat the injustice that is racism, and to do that it is necessary to understand its foundations. But this discussion, and the understanding that follows, is painful in many ways, and this pain is evident in many places in this book. It is present in the process of exposure to others, in the internal process of learning to understand differences that were before only sensed, and in the opportunities and responsibilities it creates. It is clear from this book that while being a foreigner, an outsider, can help us know, we cannot fully maintain this outsider’s status if we wish to teach in a way that encourages real learning.

How should one transmit knowledge about social realities, or in other words, what is the right way to teach about what we live? Writing about the traps awaiting those who wish to speak of civil rifts, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney lamented those conversations “where to be saved you only must save face/ And whatever you say, you say nothing.”² This is a path that many Americans follow in conversations about race. Blum of course rejects this premise, and actively struggles against the inclination to be silent about race in his earlier work as well as here. Supporting the development of a healthy public sphere requires tackling tense political issues, especially those that when silenced reproduce and strengthen injustice. The work that can be done in schools to recognize race relations and to address the injustices that racism represents and generates is immense, and in this book we are offered some practical, well-grounded directions about one possible way for teachers and educators to take on this work.

In using his philosopher’s tool kit to tackle the social realities of race and racism, the work in this book expands our understanding of what race means in America today, while at the same time expanding this tool kit itself by suggesting new ways to explore knowledge about such questions. Blum’s goals are plainly indicated in his subtitle: “What Students Can Teach Us about Morality, Diversity and Community.” Blum states that “most of all, these students had incredibly interesting things to say about race and racism... I think all Americans have something important to learn from these kids. They are tomorrow’s citizens. And we can also see from them that there are certain conversations maybe we adults should be having – but aren’t. That is the most important reason I wrote this book.” (12-13). Blum returns time and again to the ‘ uninhibited’ statements made by his students, and it seems as though he values them as a clearer and more accurate expressions of social reality as compared to the more tame utterances offered by adults participants in conversations about race. If that indeed is Blum’s view – it is not explicitly stated this way – then I would caution against seeing young age in itself as a guarantee of more truthful or accurate views. Obviously, once we understand the relevant forms of knowledge as ones rooted (among other things) in personal experience, there is good reason to

² Heaney, S. (1999). *Opened ground: selected poems, 1966-1996*. Macmillan.

listen to the experiences of individuals from any age group, and youth would not be at a disadvantage, as they might be if we focus on more authoritarian forms of knowledge. But why prioritize youth?

There are two ways to think about youth as having some form of epistemic advantage over, or even as offering some greater knowledge to which adults may not have access. The most common way of thinking of children and youth as having a greater knowledge is the Romantic one which Rousseau traced. Children are born free, naturally possessing some form of savage and pure knowledge of nature, of themselves and of the world. They have some form of superior – possibly even natural – knowledge. Students know something that ‘we’ – scholars, adults – have already forgotten, and if we listen, they can expand our knowledge. As youth, they may yet be uncorrupted by *amour-propre*, the niceties and anxieties that plague adult society and distance us from the more intuitive, perhaps almost bodily form of *amour de soi*, the type of self-knowledge that younger people own. Society corrupts them by twisting their views, by imposing norms and conventions on them in ways that inhibit them and through this process obstructs their view of the truths they were born knowing. Many have criticized this view though it still informs a variety of ‘child centered’ practices in education. I would suggest that children do not possess superior knowledge, and that whatever ails society, children should not be expected to cure with their presumed innocence or clarity of mind. If Blum endorsed this view, it would have also answered, at least partially, the question about the sources of knowledge, although I suspect the answer would not have been very accurate or satisfying.

In another sense though, which I suspect is closer to Blum’s take on the matter, there is indeed a special role for youth in confronting vexing social realities. Young people are always put on the frontier of the intergenerational project of replicating the public in which they live and which they will come to embody. They are the ones who receive the results of society’s hard-fought struggles as given social realities, and thus are in a position to more fully realize the goals which society sets for itself. They thus are blessed by their inheritance of social progress while at the same time being burdened by society’s emerging or unresolved conflicts. If we teach them certain values as worth fighting for, the faults we had thus far in realizing them would be clearer to youth, both because they had not witnessed the process of getting to where we are, and because of their developmental inclination to question and search for better answers. In this sense we can count on youth to provide the rest of the community critiques of the ways it fails to live up to its own ideals,, even as teachers continue, as Blum does, to both guide them in the process and expose them to further knowledge and perspectives.

Hence the goals of teaching about race and racism are not solely intellectual, but also instrumental. Contrary to most instrumental aspects of contemporary education, which tend to focus on success in standardized tests as a benchmark of success in the road of achieving the ultimate goals of personal prosperity along with national domination in the global market, the instrumental goals here include “moral and civic education” (p.47). This call may seem evident to many here, but its importance for contemporary schools cannot be overstated. Rather than focus much of our attention on the intricacies of implementing the recent standardized tests or common core requirement, with their supposed (productive or insidious) effects on the quality of learning, we should do well to expand our view of what good education should include, in a direction such as the ones Blum points to. We should expand our vision of quality education from the search for what we can more effectively measure and quantify to a more robust understanding of the values and qualities we develop in classrooms, ones that might support the

strengthening of American democracy and contribute to the capacity of the next generation to bring about a more just society.

A stated goal of Blum's course was to support a process of "taking responsibility for racism," a task that requires intellectual, moral and emotional involvement, and particularly productive and open interactions among participants. This task is not one that can be accomplished alone. Through the work in this course Blum aims to transform the classroom, to use Dewey's terms, from an association of interest – one that provides a vehicle for its individual members to advance their goals – to an association of sentiment, a community that allows its young members the rare occasion to have a sense of belonging to a truly diverse group of their peers. This is in fact a key, and broadly neglected, goal of public education overall. Public schools, as well as publicly-supported private schools, should be held accountable to the formation of a public that shares at least a minimal set of values and commitments, and whose members are able to see themselves as participants in a shared political project. If Feinberg is right to claim "the primary question about public education is how to initiate students into this intergenerational conversation where they understand that this conversation is about them"³ then this book offers one dimension of an answer to this pressing question. While the book devotes some attentions to matters of asymmetry, and the problems that arise from assigning equal moral responsibility to people who are in different power positions to respond or address a moral wrong, the book offers little by way of thinking about the collective responsibility that members of various groups may have for racism. By his own admission (p. 154) Blum decided to put this matter aside as he prioritized other, similarly pressing matters of intellectual and moral interest. I agree that there is only so much you can do in one course or in one book, and Blum does much more than most would have managed in a high school or other setting. Still it seemed to me that building on his largely successful effort to create a classroom community that allows for expressing controversial views on tough topics, it would have been helpful to recognize this most essential aspect of public schooling, namely, the development of the capacity to become a contributing member to one's communities, through the direct discussion of collective responsibility and the distribution of the duty to respond.

Take for example the discussion about interventions in racially charged incidents, in which Blum differentiates – based on his students' discussions – between doing the morally right thing, and doing the effective thing. When his students see one of their peers harassing or offending another in way that seems racially charged, prejudiced or discriminatory, they say that they sometimes choose not to intervene. They report that their decision is oftentimes based not only on their assessment of the situation – the substance of the offence, the relations between the participants, the all-important 'who started it' – but also on their assumptions about how their intervention would affect the situation, especially in terms of their own racial identity. Their response changes between cases in which they are of the same race as the offender or as the victim. That is not because they view the offense in a different light as a result of their own positioning. Rather, it is mostly because they see their capacity to create positive change in the circumstances as dependent on the way that others perceive them, especially racially. It seems to me that teachers, including college professors, would do well to take this insight into account in their work. Sometimes seems to us that what we say, our research or our teaching of others' research, our insights – in short, what we teach – is independent of who we are; in philosophy, the ideas are sometimes assumed to be speaking for themselves. But those who present ideas to students should recognize their standpoint (as feminist scholars have long demanded) and we

³ Feinberg, W. (2012). The idea of public education. *Review of Research in Education*, 36(1), 1-23.

would do better for both the ideas and the students if we recognize our position, and especially our identities, in the process.

Recognizing our position and the multiple ways in which each of us is different is a key step in the long-term political project of realizing our democratic values. The school and the classroom are among the most important locations for advancing this goal. Schools are crucial for this task because they *can* do it, as they encounter and serve the majority of the population for long years, and they *must* do it because they can easily be implicated in replicating injustice. This is evident in the effort presented in this book to recognize and respond to plurality while making sure not to create a hierarchy of value among the different groups we recognize. “Any serious engagement with race and racism” Blum says on p. 113 “has to take on the ideology of black inferiority.” This statement comes after a detailed discussion of the students’ responses to readings on abolitionist David Walker’s fierce challenge to Jefferson’s documented view of black mental inferiority. The focus on mental capacity is charged and painful, and the students struggle with developing a critique that would reject Jefferson’s view despite his historical standing. In a comprehensive public high school this discussion would be even more painful than, say, in a professional meeting or even in an institution of higher learning, because students in the compulsory education system are exposed daily to the persistent achievement gap between children of different ethnic and racial background. Among their teachers, many express concerns about minority parents’ commitment to their children’s education, their inclination to support their children’s schoolwork, or their ‘values.’ Minority children are regularly assumed to be academically vulnerable, less capable, or less motivated than their white peers. The gap between the norms and values espoused by schools (as expressed in their institutional design) and those that characterize minority, poor and working-class families is well documented.⁴ Clearly, the ideology of inferiority, of a hierarchical order between white or middle class parents and ‘others’ is of grave concern to those who care about democracy and justice. When a conversation about race, including the difficult matter of hierarchy of value, takes place in a school it should acknowledge that it is coming on the heels of the seemingly-harmless – even ‘scientific’ – discussion of the achievement gap, with the insidious effects that the framing of this notion creates.⁵ Understanding the history of race relations and the conditions in which the education of black children took place throughout American history is an important step in starting this conversation.

This is but one important insight in this book which can readily be considered and applied to classrooms in other high schools and colleges, and to discussions of topics that go beyond those he discussed in his course on race and racism. One easy example is his careful consideration of sitting arrangements. While this may sound mundane, maybe even minute, in fact the way a classroom is arranged physically can have a significant impact on classroom relations and as a result on the learning that occurs in the class. Regrettably, some other important aspects of what Blum has learned - can hardly be used in other settings. As Blum recognizes, Cambridge Rindge and Latin stands out as a rather unique high school in which about a third of the students identify as White, another third as African American, and a quarter as Hispanic. It is well known to those who work in the field of education that schools today are

⁴ See for example Annette Lareau’s (2003) *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life* (University of California Press).

⁵ Of course that does not mean that we should ignore the facts about achievement and attainment. For a more helpful way of addressing these see Derrick Darby’s forthcoming book, *Why the origins of the racial achievement gap matters* (University of Chicago Press).

more racially segregated than they were in 1954, before the *Brown v. Board* decision. The majority of schools today serve a clear majority of one race; most minority students, including African American, Hispanic and Native American students, attend institutions in which they have little chance of meeting children from races other than the broad category to which they belong. Many white children meet few minority children in the course of their education. Of course the very first chapters of this book reminds us that the terms themselves are misleading – for instance, ‘Hispanic’ students come of lineages that connect them to a wide variety of countries, ethnicities and histories, and are a very diverse group, and similarly other categories say too little about the people they label, because they capture too much. The superficial homogeneity of classrooms and schools may crumble upon further consideration, but still the opportunity for children to engage with those from distinct groups – income level or class, language, nationality – is often limited. Looking at the intersection of income and these broad racial categories clarifies that they are still meaningful, though. Even among kindergarten children, the differences in school settings are striking: while only 5% of white children attend a kindergarten in which more than 10% of their peers are poor, 57% of Black and Hispanic children attend high-poverty kindergarten classroom (defined as classrooms in which half or more of the children live below the poverty line).⁶ Given the proven importance of peer effects and the clear and growing differences in resources as well as social and cultural capital that characterizes families living in poverty versus those living relatively more stable and sheltered life, and given the limited contact available to many children across income and racial lines, the lived experiences of most children does not allow for an exploration of difference in the shared and nuanced ways described in this book.

Still, in the educational work he documents and in the scholarly work that he accomplishes in the book itself, Blum pushes forward the most productive aspect of interdisciplinarity, namely, the ability to take insights and productive frameworks from one area of thought and translate them in a way that informs and expands the work being done in another. This book provides an opportunity for philosophy as a discipline to move forward by considering this type of philosophical engagement with the society, specifically around race. And it offers practitioners in education – not only outsiders to the schools – a new form of engagement with the lived experiences of their students, in a way that can support them in their studies, improve their wellbeing and their civic capacity, and contribute to the advancement of society as a whole.

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⁶Weiss, E., & Garcia, E. (2014, June 25). Black and Hispanic kindergartners are disproportionately in high-poverty schools. *Economic Snapshot*, Economic Policy Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.epi.org/publication/black-hispanic-kindergartners-disproportionately/>



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