



Education Review

Reseñas Educativas

Resenhas Educativas

May 19, 2021

ISSN 1094-5296

Seider, S., & Graves, D. (2020). *Schooling for critical consciousness: Engaging Black and Latinx youth in analyzing, navigating, and challenging racial injustice*. Harvard Education Press.

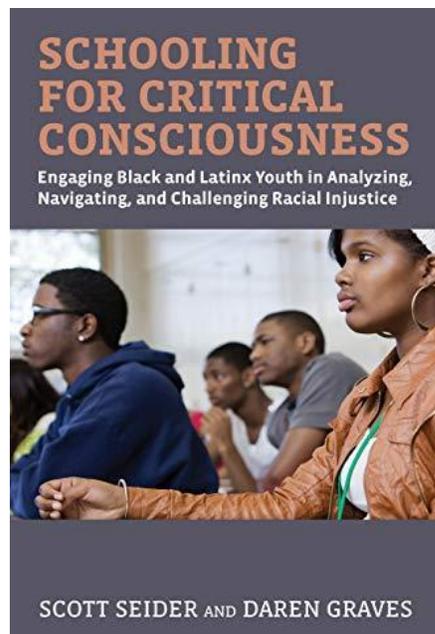
Pp. 221

ISBN: 978-1-68253-429-8

Reviewed by Delis Cuéllar
Wisconsin Center for Education Research
United States

Racism and racial disparities are politically charged topics frequently debated in national and local media. Despite the discomfort felt when addressing racial injustice and other related topics in their classrooms, educators recognize it is vital these conversations take place in a way that will support their students' personal and professional success (Pitts, 2016). Research suggests educator self-reflection and meaningful dialogue between teachers and students are key ingredients for creating a climate that equips students with needed civic skills to process and experience past and present racial injustice, and concomitant social unrest (Samuels et al., 2019).

Schooling for Critical Consciousness presents research on ways five high schools treated the topic of racial injustice with their predominately Black and Latinx students. The book demonstrates how schools can support their students' abilities to understand, manage, or confront racism by utilizing very different philosophical orientations. *Schooling for Critical Consciousness* is firmly based on educational theory and provides ample meaningful pedagogic examples for educators to consider for implementation.



Schooling for Critical Consciousness is written for a contemporary educator audience. Teachers interested in learning how to go about addressing racial injustice in their courses would benefit much from reading it. The volume could also be used as a text by college faculty working with preservice teachers. The book starts with an explanation of the authors' theoretical inclination and goes on to describe the foundational histories, demographics, and key learning experiences at each of the schools mentioned in the book. The text ends with a set of general teaching tools that effectively supported students in understanding and challenging racial injustice.

The main concept used for exploring the educational experiences of all students in the book is critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is defined as a construct composed of the following three characteristics: social analysis, political agency, and social action (p. 4). Social analysis is described as the ability to name and analyze the social, political, and economic forces that contribute to inequity and inequality. Political agency is defined as the belief that one has the capacity to bring about social or political change. Social action pertains to engaging in events or activities that confront unjust forces and social structures.

Schools featured in the book emphasized different aspects of critical consciousness, based on their different practices and philosophical underpinnings. Make the Road Academy High School used an inquiry-based approach to teaching and emphasized discussion-centered learning. One hundred percent of the school's ninth graders identified as youth of color, with five out of six identifying as Black or African American. Teachers at the school were encouraged to explore their identities along with the students. Issues of race and racism were explored across the curriculum. For instance, in Spanish class, students discussed the racism that people of color experience when shopping at the mall or at expensive stores. In social studies class, students talked about Hurricane Katrina, and remarked on what they considered the government's inaction. Of the three components of critical consciousness, students at this school were best prepared in social analysis. This is likely related to the school's focus on social justice and dialogue.

Espiritu High School first started as a summer camp and eventually became a charter school. The school utilizes a project-based approach to learning and two thirds of its students identified as Latinx. All students in the school are required to lead a hands-on improvement project during their senior year. These projects require students to research a topic of importance for them and their community. An example of one such project is a student's research study on how to improve educational services for students who are English learners. At Espiritu high school, students graduated with higher levels of political agency in comparison to students at the other schools. This is likely because their senior project also requires them to share project findings with important stakeholders.

Harriet Tubman High School implemented a “no-excuses” (p. 79) approach to schooling with emphasis on mathematics and literacy. The school serves a mostly Black/African American student body, and 80% of their students came from low-income households. Harriet Tubman school leadership looked to provide students with a “highly rigorous academic program that would defy the inequitable education opportunities afforded to low-income youth and youth of color” (p. 79). The school’s approach to fostering critical consciousness differed from the rest of the schools in the book. Students’ academic achievement was explained as “a form of personal social action that pushed back against societal stereotypes about their capabilities” (p. 82). Rigorous academic programming was deemed an important navigational tool to sidestep the obstacles presented by white supremacy and racism. The authors pointed out that students at Harriet Tubman felt capable of navigating various social spaces to succeed academically and professionally.

Community Academy High School served Black/African American and Latinx students. It is the first public school in the U.S. to be located in a community health center. The school’s mission is, “To engage deeply and productively in community life” (p. 113). The curriculum paired lessons on racial injustice with lessons on resisting injustice. The school had a very active student club that was dedicated to community activism in and out of the school. Many students participated in marches and demonstrations, such as the 2017 Women’s March and organized protests for the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. At Community Academy High School, students demonstrated a higher commitment to activism in comparison to students in the other schools. This is likely because the school valued activism and teachers’ willingness to discuss their own activism activities with their students.

Leadership High School student body was 75% Black/African American. The school’s primary goals include preserving democracy, increasing students’ civic skills, and an intensive focus on academic rigor. All students were required to be part of voter registration drives and to take a course called American Democracy that was co-taught by a practicing lawyer and a school faculty member. The course taught students how laws at every level of government are drafted, lobbied, implemented, and interpreted. Student elective courses at Leadership High School included Black Experience, Latino Literature, and Post-Colonial Literature. Students were involved in protests related to community gentrification, the national Muslim travel ban, and police brutality. A challenge the school faced was the lack of diversity in their teaching staff. Students at Leadership High School demonstrated high levels of commitment to take social action by engaging in activities that promoted social justice.

After examining each school, the authors present teaching tools that best support students. Educators at all of the participating schools found ways to teach students about the dominant narratives that uphold the country’s racial

hierarchy, and about counter-narratives that help refute racial injustice. Students were most motivated by life relevant assignments that focused on improving their communities and where students could learn from their peers. The more successful teachers were those who were willing to discuss their activism or personal experiences with oppressive social forces, such as racism or homophobia, with their students. The authors notably emphasized only one of the three components of critical consciousness per school. A glaring challenge of how to systematically engage students in all three aspects of critical consciousness – social analysis, political agency, and social action – is highlighted by the lack of equal emphasis for all three tenets. Future research can focus on ways to engage all three pillars of critical consciousness with equal emphasis so students may analyze, navigate, and challenge racial injustice.

References

- Freire, P., & Ramos, M. B. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Pitts, J. (2016). Don't say nothing: Silence speaks volumes. Our students are listening. *Teaching Tolerance*, 54, 46-49.
- Samuels, A. J., Samuels, G. L., & Self, C. (2019). Champions of equity: Fostering civic education to challenge silence, racial inequity, and injustice. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 21(2), 78-84.

About the Reviewer

Delis Cuéllar, Ph.D., is an associate researcher and member of the Social Justice Team at WIDA Consortium at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. Past professional experiences includes assistant professor of child development at Humboldt State University, research associate at the University of Oregon, and postdoctoral researcher at the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.



Education Review

Reseñas Educativas

Resenhas Educativas



Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas is supported by the Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, distribute, and adapt this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and *Education Review*, the changes are identified, and the same

license applies to the derivative work. More details are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

Disclaimer: The views or opinions presented in book reviews are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of *Education Review*.



Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview