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Understanding Race, Class and Culture Pages 8-13

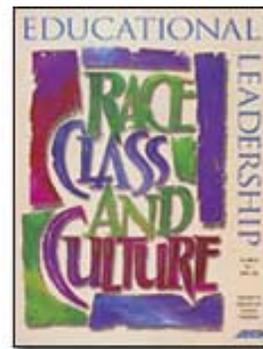
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A Different Mirror: A Conversation with Ronald Takaki

Joan Montgomery Halford

How can education reflect all voices in our history? Can multiculturalism reunite our fragmented society? Educator and historian Ronald Takaki discusses the power of a curriculum that mirrors many ethnic perspectives.

A pioneer in the field of ethnic studies, Ronald Takaki has written nine books on diversity in American society, including the widely acclaimed A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America (1993) and A Larger Memory: A History of Our Diversity, With Voices (1998). Takaki, the grandson of Japanese immigrants in Hawaii, has bridged many cultures as a student, a scholar, and an activist. As a young professor, for example, he taught the first black studies course offered at the University of California, Los Angeles, shortly after the Watts riots. Recently, Takaki spoke with Educational Leadership about diversity and education.



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How do you define multicultural education?

The multiculturalism I have been seeking is a serious scholarship that includes all American peoples and challenges the traditional master narrative of American history. The traditional master narrative we've learned in our schools says that this country was founded by Americans of European ancestry and that our ideas are rooted in Western civilization. But when we just look around at ourselves, we realize that not all of us came from Europe. Many of us came from Africa and Latin America, and others were already here in North America. And others, like my grandfather, came from a Pacific shore. It is not only more inclusive, but also more *accurate* to recognize this diversity. The intellectual purpose of multiculturalism is a more accurate understanding of who we are as Americans.

Multicultural education has been misrepresented by the critics of multiculturalism, especially Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who presents multiculturalism as ethnic separatism in his book *The Disuniting of America*. What Schlesinger has done is to equate multiculturalism with Afrocentrism. But Afrocentrism is not multicultural, it's monocultural. And so what Schlesinger has done is to reduce multiculturalism to the shrillness of ethnic separatism manifested in some versions of Afrocentrism.

Does multiculturalism risk being treated as a fad?

I don't think it will be a fad because of the changing face of America. By 2001, whites in California will become a minority group just like African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans—and 2001 is only three years away. Within three years in California, we will all be minorities. California is only the thin end of a larger entering wedge. Researchers have projected that by around 2050, all of us in the United States will be minorities. In the coming multicultural millennium, we will be reminded of our diversity every day. It would be a danger for multicultural education to be a fad. It needs to be up front and central.

I often think about the Los Angeles riots of April 29, 1992. That night on our TV screens, we saw the black smoke rising to the skies above Los Angeles, the Korean stores burning out of control, and the frightening violence on the streets. But the most powerful image that was beamed out of L.A. that night was the trembling face

of Rodney King. Many of us still hear his words echoing in our minds. He said, "Please, people, we're stuck here for a while. We can get along, we can work it out." The question is, How do we work it out? How do we get along unless we learn more about one another in a systematic and informed way? Multiculturalism can help reunite America.

A few months ago, a white elementary school teacher in Brooklyn chose to teach the book Nappy Hair, which celebrates African American hair, to her predominantly African American class. The teaching of the book provoked parents in the school to make physical threats against the teacher. Incidents such as this have frightened educators. How can educators safely address diversity in the classroom?

It's very important for educators to explain clearly to parents what they are doing and why they are doing it. Educators must work with parent organizations to explain why, for example, we're teaching a book called *Nappy Hair*. Had that school had open discussions about the texts that teachers would be using in the classroom, parents would know that teachers don't make decisions about what they'll be having their students read in isolation from the community.

But there is a larger problem here. Many parents who complain don't attend the parent-teacher meetings. In many cases, these parents are working long hours, and it's very difficult for them to get to meetings in the evening or the late afternoon. The social and economic contexts make this kind of information sharing very difficult. And that's something that needs to be kept in mind.

Educators such as E. D. Hirsch advocate teaching a curriculum of core knowledge. What is your opinion?

I agree with Hirsch. There's knowledge that I think every American should know. There should be a core. The question, however, is, What should be the content of this core? This is where Hirsch and I differ.

At the back of Hirsch's best-selling book, *Cultural Literacy, What Every American Needs to Know*, a 66-page appendix lists terms that every cultural literate person should know. If you look at this list, you'll find that it's very Eurocentric. For example, the list

includes Ellis Island, but it omits Angel Island. How many Americans have heard of Angel Island? People who live in San Francisco can see Angel Island in the middle of San Francisco Bay. We think of Angel Island as a place to bike, hike, and picnic. However, Angel Island was also the site of the immigration station for Chinese and Japanese immigrants; the remains of it are still there. We need to include Angel Island in a list for cultural literacy.

So I agree with Hirsch that we need a core, but the question is, Whose core will this be? I would like this core to be reflective of a more accurate understanding of who we are as Americans.

Do you think the standards movement is helpful in promoting this core?

The problem is that these standards are often set by bureaucrats. More educators should come together and determine what core knowledge is and engage one another in dialogue and debate. Just the term *standards* is intimidating. It suggests rigidity. Knowledge is something that is more vibrant, more fluid. I would be reluctant to endorse or promote standards. The question is, Where are the standards going to be made? Many people making them in the agencies are not educators.

How do class differences factor into multicultural education? People often discuss multiculturalism in terms of race and ethnicity, but what about class?

Class is very important. Most of us wouldn't even be here if it were not for the demand for the labor of our ancestors. Jews, for example, were needed as workers in the garment industry. And the Irish were needed to build the railroads and to work in the textile mills. My Japanese grandfather would not be here had it not been for the need for his labor on the sugar plantations of Hawaii.

Class is a hidden reality of American history. We overlook class, but class is central to the ethnic experience, including the experience of European immigrant groups. This is where multiculturalism can bring us together. When we examine our history, we will all find that we are linked to one another in terms of our class in intricate ways.

Take, for example, slavery. How many Americans really know why slavery was

established in what would become the United States? Many people have this notion that slavery just began when the first 20 Africans were landed by a Dutch slave ship in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. But actually, those first 20 Africans were not slaves. They became indentured servants. There was no law for slavery in the English colonies at that point.

Even in 1675, 55 years later, blacks constituted only 5 percent of the total population in the Virginia colony. If slavery was such a profitable institution, why didn't these white planters bring in more labor from Africa? Well, they had this vision of Virginia as a reproduction of English society in the New World. Hence, there was resistance to the importation of large numbers of non-English, especially laborers who did not look European.

The Virginia planters did not want to bring in Africans, but they did bring in large numbers of white indentured servants from England and Ireland. But these white indentured servants had the right to bear arms. That was an English right. In 1676, they engaged in Bacon's Rebellion; the rebels burned down Jamestown. And the rebellion was repressed only after British troops came to Virginia.

After Bacon's Rebellion, the planter class realized that it would be dangerous to depend on a white laboring class that had the freedom of assembly and the right to bear arms. At that point, the planter class decided to shift from white indentured servitude to enslaved African labor. African labor was denied the right of assembly and the right to bear arms. The working class could be disarmed because of race. By 1740, the black population in Virginia had risen from 5 to 40 percent. This was when slavery became an institution.

The point I'm making involves the relationship between class and race. Racial diversity was forged in the crucibles of white class conflict. Black workers were used and pitted against white workers. And white workers who were also economically exploited and degraded thought that they belonged to a white aristocracy. During the Civil War, these white workers went to war and were killed to defend an institution that did not benefit them economically or socially.

So when the president is asked to apologize for slavery, the question I have to ask as

a historian is, Apologize to whom? It's not just to Africans and their descendants, but also to the white workers who were then pitted against these newly imported workers from Africa. Race is tied intricately to class. When we understand this intricate tie that binds us, we begin to see that we do share much common ground in class.

Why do you distinguish between race and ethnicity?

In American history, Americans who had distinct physical characteristics because of their skin color or the shape of their eyes represented an ethnic group because they had different religions and different cultures—but they also represented a racial group. And people were stigmatized because of their distinct physical characteristics. And this led to legislation against them, like slavery, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the internment of Japanese Americans. Neither Italians nor Germans were interned during World War II. You have to make a distinction between ethnic experience and racial experience. To lump together race and ethnicity violates this complex reality.

I am a scholar who strives to make the distinction between race and ethnicity. European immigrant groups were ethnic groups. They represented different religions. And Catholics and Jews suffered the oppression of ethnocentrism inflicted upon them by a Protestant America. But because they were white, they were eligible for naturalized citizenship, and they were able then to exercise political power and advance their economic and social interests.

On the other hand, Asian immigrants were not eligible for naturalized citizenship. The Naturalization Act of 1790 specified explicitly that to be eligible for naturalized citizenship, you first had to be white—and it used the term *white*. You might think, "That was 1790." Well, this law was in effect until 1952. And because of this law, my grandparents never became U.S. citizens. How is that for an example of the difference between race and ethnicity?

What are your thoughts on bilingual education?

Students who go through a good bilingual education program learn English with greater competency and rapidity than students who are just immersed in English-only classrooms. Teaching students in their native languages gives them cultural

dignity.

Bilingual education doesn't disunite us. It's not a cultural separatism. Actually, it lets America be America, to use the phrase of Langston Hughes: "Let America be America where equality is in the air we breathe." For us to acknowledge the native languages of others is to embrace equality for them.

Talk with us about your stance on affirmative action.

Most Americans support affirmative action. In January 1997, the *New York Times* reported that only 25 percent of Americans polled actually wanted to abolish affirmative action. Another 25 percent said they want to continue affirmative action as is. And about 40 percent said let's mend it, not eliminate it. Most of us as Americans realize that we belong to a nation that—to use Lincoln's language in his Gettysburg Address—is dedicated to the "proposition" of equality. We believe in equality and fairness, and we realize that the playing field is not a level one. A person's life chances depend largely on where he or she resides or goes to school. And so we need to create a more level playing field.

The government is an important instrument to do this. Now, when we think of affirmative action, we usually think of it in terms of affirmative action for underrepresented racial minorities. But actually the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action have been white women. Affirmative action has opened up opportunities for them to enter professions such as law, medicine, and business in increasing numbers. With Proposition 209 in California, there was a misrepresentation of affirmative action as a racial program.

I have written a draft of a pro-affirmative action initiative, the California Equality Initiative, for the ballot in 2000. The California Equality Initiative revises the principle and policy of affirmative action. My initiative reads that in order to act affirmatively in the promotion of equality of opportunity, it shall be lawful for the State of California to consider race, gender, or socioeconomic class disadvantage as criteria in the selection of qualified individuals for education, employment, and government contracting. This law does not permit quotas, but it does allow the consideration of the above three categories.

What I've done in my draft is to include socioeconomic class disadvantage. I've been teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, for almost 30 years now. And I don't find white students or even black or Chicano students from the working class and the lower class. The average family income of our students exceeds \$100,000 a year; we are an elite university in terms of class. And if we want to practice our commitment to equality of opportunity, then we have to practice it in terms not only of race and gender but also of socioeconomic class disadvantage. And students who come from the lower classes and the working classes are at a disadvantage.

They have lower SAT scores for one thing. They don't have the family resources to take those expensive SAT preparation courses. Further, students who are admitted to Berkeley are given what's called a *bonus point* for advanced placement courses or honors courses. So if you have the privilege of attending an elite suburban high school where you can find an abundance of AP courses, then you are awarded five points; an A is regarded as five points for AP courses. And so we have students with 4.0 GPAs who are black and Latino who are competing against white and Asian students with 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 GPAs. And this is unfair.

In the epilogue of A Larger Memory, you write movingly about your high school religion teacher, Dr. Shunji Nishi. Could you tell our readers how Dr. Nishi made a difference in your life?

When I was a teenager, I was not academically inclined. I was growing up in Hawaii, and my parents had a restaurant near the beach. I became a very good surfer. In my Episcopalian high school, I didn't do especially well. I was required to take a course in religion that was taught by a teacher named Dr. Nishi, a Japanese American with a Ph.D. I was curious and impressed. I can remember going home and saying to my mother, who had been born on a plantation and who had only an 8th grade education, "My teacher's name is Dr. Nishi. He's Japanese American and he has a Ph.D. What's a Ph.D.?" And she looked at me and she said, "I don't know, but he must be very smart." A light bulb went on in my head. I thought maybe I too could become a Ph.D., Ronald Takaki Ph.D.

Dr. Nishi became a role model for me. He wrote comments on my papers: "How do you know this is true? Is this point valid?" Often, he wrote, "Interesting." Occasionally,

he wrote, "Insightful." A relationship developed between the two of us. During the second semester of my senior year, as I was walking across campus, Dr. Nishi saw me and he said, "Ronald, I think you should go away to college. There's a fine liberal arts college in Ohio called the College of Wooster. Would you like to go to the College of Wooster?" I immediately blurted out, "No, that's too far away." I had never been off the island. I could not imagine going all the way to Ohio to attend college. But Dr. Nishi asked, "Would it be OK if I wrote to the college to tell them about you?" And I said fine.

A month later I received a letter from the dean of the College of Wooster and the letter read, "Dear Mr. Takaki, you have been accepted to the College of Wooster, but please fill out the application form." When I look back at this,

I realize that this was an early version of affirmative action. This dean was offering me an opportunity to pursue educational equality. He hadn't even received my transcripts to know what my GPA was, and it wasn't that high. This dean had not received my SAT scores, which were not that high, either. I think he decided on the basis of that letter written by Dr. Nishi that I represented quality. How do you measure—how do you quantify—"insightfulness"? It's not something that we can reduce to numbers. We have become prisoners of quantitative instruments and quantitative measurements of merit and quality. I also think this dean thought it would be good for the College of Wooster to have greater ethnic diversity, that it would be good to have Asian Americans.

This experience changed my life. I accepted the invitation to go to the College of Wooster, and that sent me on the path that led me to this conversation we're having. Had it not been for Dr. Nishi, had it not been for this dean taking a risk and admitting me, I would not be a professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

When I got to Wooster, most people did not see me as an American. My fellow white students would ask me questions like, How long have you been in this country? Where did you learn to speak English? I realized that I didn't look American to them. My name didn't sound American, yet my grandfather came here in 1886. As a family, we've been here longer than many European immigrant groups, longer than the Italians, the Irish, and the Polish. And yet no one would ask them, How long have you

been in this country?

I could have changed my name to Ron Taylor, but that wouldn't have helped. I began to think about what it means to be an American and how many people did not see Americans except in terms of a European perspective. After I earned my degree at Wooster, I decided to pursue a Ph.D. When I came to Berkeley, I was swept up in the Civil Rights movement. And this is what stirred me to study race in America.

You use the term hidden reality to characterize the stories left out of American history. How do educators begin to give voice to these hidden realities?

We need to do our homework. When I went to college, multicultural research was not available to me. And the master narrative of American history wasn't very critical of our past. But now this scholarship is in our schools of education. The new generation of teachers will have a more accurate understanding of American history. And it's important to have this accurate understanding if we're going to get along with one another. We're going to find out about these hidden histories because multicultural scholarship has emerged.

Multiculturalism is an affirming of what this country stands for: opportunity, equality, and the realization of our dream.

Editor's note: To order the April 1999 *EL on Tape* audiotape featuring this live interview with Ronald Takaki, contact the ASCD Service Center. Price: \$9.95 (member); \$11.95 (non-member). Stock no. 299043.

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