



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants Curriculum

EFLA STUDY GUIDE

INTRO UNIT: THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION: EMPOWERMENT VS. PROPAGANDA

CLASS 3: MISEDUCATION AND ITS LEGACIES

OVERVIEW

Teaching young children about race is controversial for many parents who believe that adolescents are too young to know or think about racial difference. Yet, studies show that young children formulate ideas about racial difference even if they are not taught these ideas at home. The infamous Doll Test, an experiment that gained national attention during the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which ruled that *separate but unequal* facilities were unconstitutional, are painful reminders of how racial meaning is transmitted through cultural practices and symbols. Even before young children are enrolled in schools, they experience a form of miseducation in which value and meaning are associated with skin color.

For years, the Doll Test has been used as evidence that Black children suffer low self-esteem as a result of segregation and the negative connotations of dark skin. However, research suggests that this is not often the case. In fact, Black children sometimes exhibit high self-esteem, particularly young Black girls who are often depicted unfavorably in popular culture and media. So what does the Doll Test show? Cultural historian Robin Bernstein argues that the Doll Test reflects children's knowledge of dominant cultural symbols and meaning that are not necessarily tied to images of self. She also cautions against using the test, in which the line of questioning "which doll looks like you," entraps the child respondent resulting in a moment of connection and realization that is potentially traumatic and abusive. Despite the concerns surrounding the administration of the test and legitimate questions regarding its validity, the test demonstrates that young children are exposed to notions of white supremacy and black inferiority prior to extensive schooling. The process of miseducation begins at play, and it is global.

The lessons that children learn in school are therefore critical in either confirming or contradicting the racialized concepts and symbols they have internalized during the early stages of their development. Parents and educators may believe children are too young to process complicated histories of racial oppression, inequality and power, but true democracy demands that we provide opportunities for young people to learn about multiple cultures, and more importantly, we must tell the truth. For students of color, a culturally grounded curriculum is also linked to high performance and positive identity.

The recent backlash to multicultural curricula in the United States is alarming to say the least. Not only are children internalizing cultural expressions of racial difference at an early age, as they get older their exposure to multicultural experiences and perspectives are restricted by narrow school curricula. Resistance to ethnic studies, the banning of books from schools and libraries, and the whitewashing of history textbooks and class assignments are indicative of an age-old problem—“education as propaganda.” As Carter G. Woodson warned, miseducation serves as a tool to justify the existing social and political order.

The newspaper articles in this lesson highlight some of the current challenges facing a culturally rich education. There are cases throughout the United States in places like Arizona, Texas, North Carolina, New York and California that require our attention and vigilance. These readings only confirm that the legacy of miseducation continues to threaten a diverse and socially just society.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- ✓ Identify contemporary forms of resistance to multicultural perspectives and learning
- ✓ Recognize the political implications of conservative interventions in school curricula and textbooks

ASSIGNMENT

Read the following materials and answer the study questions.

James C. McKinley, Jr., “Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2010 (7 – 10 min)

Link: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/13/education/13texas.html?_r=0

Study Questions

1. Why did conservatives want to change the social studies curriculum?
2. If no historians, sociologists or economists were consulted for the curriculum changes, who were deemed the experts?
3. Why were the suggestions made by Hispanic board members to include more Latino figures in the curriculum consistently defeated?

David A. Love, “Arizona’s Ethnic Studies Ban Whitewashes History,” *The Griot Opinion Column*, May 13, 2010 (7 – 10 min)

Link: <http://thegrio.com/2010/05/13/arizonas-ethnic-studies-ban-whitewashes-history/>

Study Questions

1. Why did a group of six UN human rights experts denounce the Arizona law that prohibits the teaching of ethnic studies classes?
2. In addition to the ban on ethnic studies, what other measure did the Arizona Department of Education adopt?
3. Why did conservative Republicans in Arizona support the ban on ethnic studies?
4. According to the author, what is the underlying reason that white conservatives in Arizona are supporting the ban on ethnic studies? What does the ban have to do with the demographics of the state?

Gene Demby, “Lots of Confusion Over Teacher Firings at Howard University Middle School,” *NPR*, February 3, 2015

Link: <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/02/03/383574693/lots-of-confusion-over-teacher-firings-at-howard-university-middle-school>

Study Questions

1. According to the social studies teachers at Howard University Middle School, why were they fired from their teaching positions?
2. Why is this particular case significant?

Marc Santia, “Children Barred from Writing about Malcolm X in NYC School,” *NBC New York*, February 10, 2014

Link: <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Malcolm-X-Essays-Banned-Queens-School-Black-History-244745971.html>

Study Questions

1. What did a teacher from the PS 201 School ban Malcolm X from the writing assignment?
2. What lesson did a mother set out to teach her son when she protested the

barring of Malcolm X?

Olivia Katrandjian, “Teacher Who Assigned Math Homework with Slavery Questions Resigns,” ABC News, January 21, 2012

Link: <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/01/teacher-who-assigned-math-homework-with-slavery-questions-resigns/>

1. Why were parents angered by the math homework questions about slavery?

Brown at 60: The Doll Test, NAACP Legal Defense Fund

Link: <http://www.naacpldf.org/brown-at-60-the-doll-test>

Study Questions

1. What was the Doll Test and what were its findings?