

Color Blindness
Addressing Racial Relations Through Art Education
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Desai (2010) describes the current phenomenon of *color blindness*, which some sociologists consider to be the new form of racism. She claims that, as a nation, we have made progress in race relations since the Civil Rights movement. However, the new approach seems to be avoidance. In schools and society, people tend to avoid the difficult conversations that make meaningful changes. Desai states that colorblind racism includes:

... (1) an increase in covert racial discourses and practices; (2) avoidance of racial terms and claims by Whites that they experience reverse racism; (3) language or “semantic moves” that avoid direct racial references in order to safely express racial views; (4) invisibility regarding the mechanisms of inequality. (p. 23)

Desai explains that White students become offended when they are accused of color blindness, while colored students often avoid confronting the racism that they experience. By refusing to address the issues involved in race relations, teachers are simply fueling racism. Roberts, Bell, and Murphy (2008) also speak about the mentality surrounding color blindness. They state that the overall national mentality, “...reflects an increasingly vocal and pervasive color-blind ideology that asserts racial equality has mostly been achieved rendering demands for further redress unnecessary” (p. 336).

Kraehe (2015) sheds additional light on this color blindness and avoidance of racial issues. She refers to this aversion as *colormuteness*. Kraehe convicts, “Though colormuteness is often enacted by well-meaning individuals...it is...a key mechanism by which White supremacy is institutionalized” (p. 200). Today’s racism is still deeply ingrained in American culture and society, but the forms of manifestation are often more subtle and unconscious than previous decades. She describes the *microaggression* of dominant racial groups, communicated verbally and nonverbally, which devalue the realities of racial minorities.

To confront color blindness, teachers must first understand how it originates in the mindset of young adults. For many, environment plays a key role. If students grow up in an area that is comprised of predominantly White individuals, their exposure to minorities is limited to what they see in the media (Desai, 2010). Desai (2010) concludes, “Many White

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students' understandings of difference are based on popular culture and media images...They grew up seeing images and often stereotypes" (p. 24). Many students only have exposure to minority groups through motion picture or print sources. They shape their views based on media portrayals, not firsthand experiences. To promote cultural diversity, images of racial differences are often standardized as the status quo. Acuff, Hirak, and Nangah (2012) speak of the *Master Narrative* that dominant groups use to standardize certain historical and social norms. As this group shapes the Master Narrative to their liking, they make omissions, implying that content relating to minority groups is irrelevant or expendable. As students engage with the accepted narratives of society, their racial biases are only confirmed and supported. If our students lack exposure to diversity and only learn the recounts of the Master Narrative, they certainly will not foster an open and accepting outlook towards other races.

Roberts, Bell, and Murphy (2008) discuss the school system's hand in continued racial segregation. They claim that schools are more segregated for Blacks and Latinos than they were several decades ago. Schools in urban settings receive less funding and resources and participate in less demanding curriculum plans. Mainstreamed narratives consider urban youth students to be *at risk* or potential threats to society. Roberts, Bell, and Murphy remind readers, "Even schools with more racially integrated student bodies segregate through differential curriculum...that follow along racial lines" (p. 335).

Lee (2013) notes that teachers are also at fault in fostering racism and segregation in school. After gathering data from practicing and preservice teachers, she found that many educators feel inadequately prepared to implement multicultural learning. They were not sufficiently prepared to work with students of diverse backgrounds. Some teachers also admitted to treating students of color differently, intentionally or unintentionally, based on their racial biases and expectations for achievement.

Addressing issues of race relations is not a comfortable or simple task. Desai (2010) offers advice to teachers for addressing these topics with students. Racial literacy is essential to the classroom discussion of racial color blindness in the media and popular culture. She describes this method of communication as an interactive process. As students develop the skills to identify and address racial issues, they gain a deeper understanding of the complexities

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and relationships of race relations. Acuff, Hiram, and Nangah (2012) stress the importance of deconstructing the Master Narrative in our education programs. They state, “Adopting culturally responsive pedagogy establishes a platform for multiple voices to be used in the construction of knowledge” (p. 7). Although most my students are White, it is essential that they develop the skills to approach the content of a lesson from varying viewpoints. They should be able to enter a narrative of history, using the perspective of a member of any racial group.

Thompson (1997) concurs that an anti-racist pedagogy for education is necessary in addressing the heart of racism. Rather than simply reacting or correcting racism, teachers need to address these issues at the root of meaning and value. Such means of improvement involve a shift in the education system. She points out that this requires a rethinking and restructuring of race relations. Performance and creation spaces are safe places where, “...the commonplaces of racism can be unsettled—in which racism can be addressed as a framing of meaning, rather than as natural” (p. 35). Roberts, Bell, and Murphy (2008) advise that *race* should not be approached as a biological classification, but rather as a socially imposed arrangement of reinforcing hierarchies and inequalities.

Lee (2013) explains that teacher preparation for the field is the ground zero for change in school programs. She conducted studies with undergraduate and graduate students, asking them to participate in an art education studio course. In this course, students examined social justice issues through the practice of transformative learning theories. For adult students to experience transformative learning, Lee outlines the criteria:

First, students must develop an awareness and be willing to critically examine assumptions—both of their own and the assumptions of others. Secondly, students recognize their frames of reference through critical reflection and engage their imaginations in order to understand and reframe problems from a different perspective. Lastly, this theory supports the notion that critical dialogue plays a key role in making learning meaningful...which positions learners to engage in critically reflexive thinking. (p. 143)

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Through findings from this course, Lee concludes that learning through art making processes assisted in unlearning some of the preservice educators' racial biases. The students reported to Lee that a personal involvement with the issues, through the creation of artwork, facilitated an emotional change. They also reported that the environment of the class had an influence on their ability to make new connections and self-analyze. A safe space for truthful discussions and honest vulnerability was key to their transformation. Desai (2010) advises, "Creating artworks in art classes that speak to the emotional, physical, and psychological toll of racism...can break the silence and pry open dialogue about racial inequalities" (p. 28).

Roberts, Bell, and Murphy (2008) research the effects of implementing their Storytelling Project (STP) curriculum in an urban high school setting. This curriculum aimed to build, "...a community in which stories about race and racism can be openly shared...critically discussed and analyzed" (p. 338). The sharing of unconventional, raw stories added an authenticity to the realities of racial minorities. They addressed language and jokes that support racial stereotypes. Overall, these authors concluded that such a method of instruction could certainly open doors to successful discussion of racial relations within the school community.

Whitehead (2008) describes methods of addressing diversity in the context of art. She interviews four artists of color and analyzes their individual tactics to addressing race through their work. She explains, "...diversity can be implemented by including nontraditional, cross-cultural, or controversial art" (p. 33). To fully appreciate the gravity of such works, students need to possess the correct set of analytical skills. Art educators ought to teach their students to criticize and question the mainstreamed norms. They should not simply accept the status quo. Rather, they need to examine the effectiveness of such systems, recognizing when they are oppressive or narrow-minded. Overall, these four female artists agree that art can be a powerful tool in raising awareness to societal issues.

Desai (2010) advocates for the study of contemporary artists in the art classroom. She mentions that some current artists prompt a reevaluation of established ideas of racism. She explains that many artists examining this issue position their work within the context of historical moments. Viewing such works forces students to think about the connection between history, social status, and race.

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As teachers engage students in the difficult conversations about racial segregation and racism in communities, they are slowly unraveling the color divide in society and schools. The first step to making change is understanding and addressing the root of the problem. Often, issues arise from avoidance. The media and environmental exposure also play a critical role in students' mentality and attitudes towards individuals of differing races. Finally, teacher preparation and classroom practices lay the groundwork for students' willingness to change the status quo. In addressing racial segregation through art classroom, the teacher must promote racial literacy, reframe the Master Narrative, establish an anti-racist pedagogy of education, and foster discussion of the issues through art making.

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