

(Not) Talking about Race in the Classroom

The Research of Assistant Professor Mica Pollock

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by Cara Feinberg

In the spring of 1995, rumor had it that Columbus High School had made “The List.” The California district’s secret register of schools labeled “low-performing” had long been a topic of speculation among faculty members. Everyone knew it existed, but no one seemed to know who was on it, or exactly how you got on it. So, one May afternoon, when the entire staff piled into the school library to attend a meeting called by a district administrator, Columbus educators thought they might finally learn some answers. Instead, they discovered that they were all in danger of being fired, but no one from the school district would talk specifically about why.

[Mica Pollock](#), now an anthropologist and assistant professor of education at HGSE, was a first-year English teacher that year on the Columbus staff. She and her colleagues sat astounded as they were told that their school was “dysfunctional” and that they had one year to meet the district’s standards. If they failed, the entire staff, from principal to secretary, would be “reconstituted”—ousted and replaced by other educators who could better handle the job.

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Pollock and her fellow teachers pushed for details, but there was no clear discussion about the district’s standards or how the staff might meet them. Instead, they were cryptically told, “*All students can learn.*” Only when Pollock investigated the situation as a graduate student the following year and read the district’s policy and legal documents, she learned what the administration had never articulated at the meeting. Columbus High School, they felt, had not adequately served two racial groups: African Americans and Hispanics.

Pollock’s new book, *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School*, explores what happened at Columbus High School and how the events exposed one of American society’s most confounding questions: when to speak about people in racial terms. Americans often fear that these conversations will reinforce “racism,” Pollock explains. But *failing* to speak about race can be even more detrimental. “If we see that black and Latino students, for example, are performing poorly in school, and we never explicitly address it, we send a message that these patterns are both acceptable and expected,” she says. “In effect, we perpetuate the problem.”

Pollock’s three years of ethnographic research on race labeling at Columbus—a high school whose name has been changed to protect the community’s privacy—led her to discover six core dilemmas of American race talk and to explore how educators and policymakers might engage in constructive conversations about race. For example, Pollock argues that, by neglecting to identify racial achievement patterns, both district administrators and school staff avoided discussing how ongoing school improvement efforts could address key issues of racial inequality. As a result, many staff members were fired, and the new staff made the same crucial omissions.

Identifying racial achievement patterns, however, is only the first step in solving the problem, she says. “Americans, inside *and* outside of schools,

have to look at our own roles in creating these patterns.” For Pollock, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) exemplifies how American educational policy misses that mark. “Just as district officials penalized Columbus High School educators, NCLB punishes schools when they can’t ‘fix’ students’ low achievement,” she says. “But this isn’t a problem created by teachers alone.” Although NCLB takes a bold step by explicitly pointing out the racial achievement gap, Pollock says, it presents little instruction—or funding—to truly address the problem. There will be no real movement on these issues until policymakers include themselves in the solution, she explains. “The government’s own policies help create societal disparities in opportunity, and those disparities, if unchecked, affect achievement.”

Although Pollock’s work focuses on the field of education, she by no means confines the dilemmas of race talk to the realm of schools. Educators, she says, experience these traps with particular intensity, as they confront the nation’s diversity and inequities every day. As a result, Pollock argues that teachers and policymakers have the greatest potential to attack these dilemmas head on. Education has often been called the great equalizer, but how adults and children talk about race in schools will play a critical role in determining whether or not that is really the case.

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