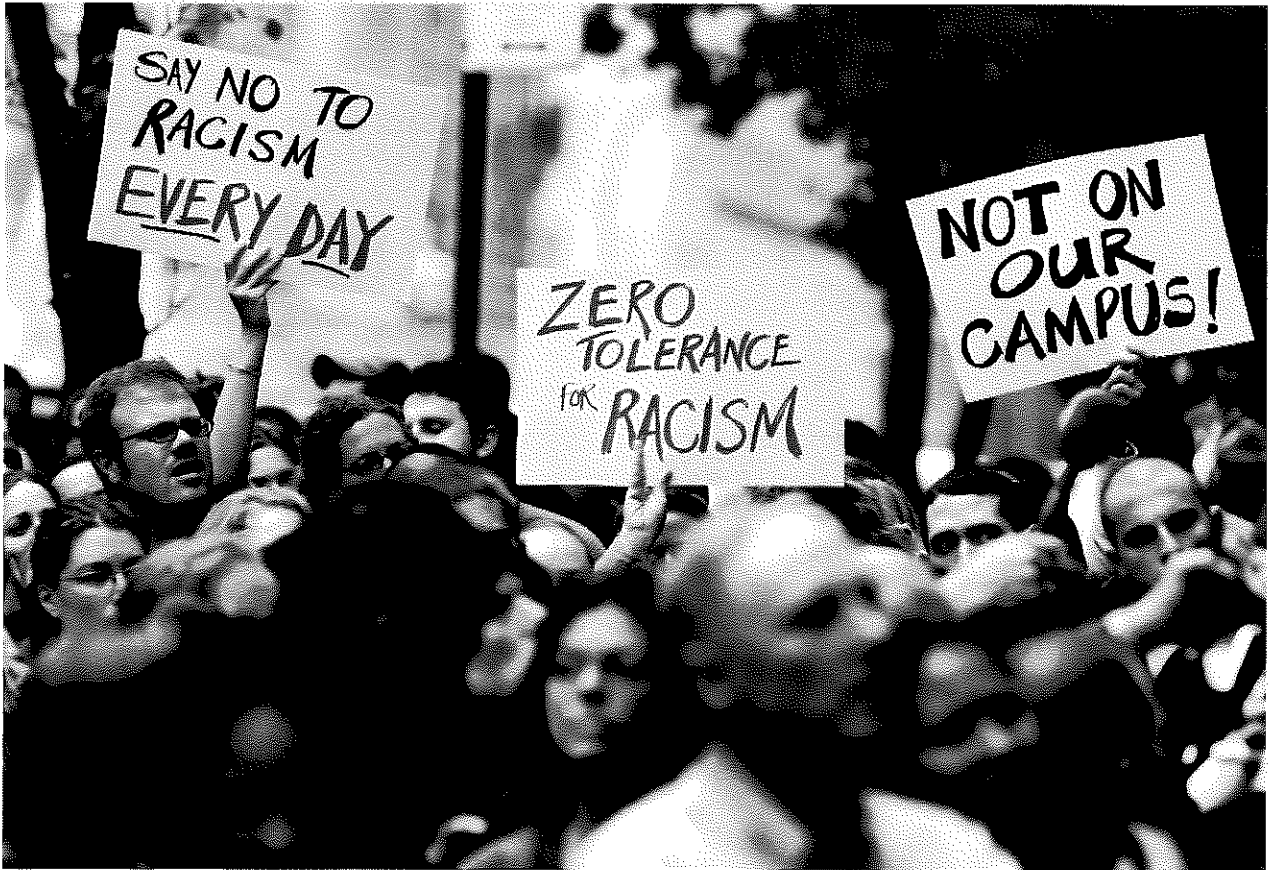*The* Atlantic

How Teachers Learn to Discuss Racism

Urban-education programs prepare them for imperative contemporary conversations with students.

Reuters

MELINDA D. ANDERSON | JAN 9, 2017 | EDUCATION

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After a rash of police killings last summer, H. Richard Milner, a professor of urban education at the University of Pittsburgh, set out to answer a question that had been gnawing at him for some time. As a noted expert on race in education, he frequently received calls from journalists seeking comment on how to help teachers talk about race in the classroom, typically following the fatal police shooting of a black victim. And he always thought the questioning was misguided and inadequate. "Rather than asking me how to help teachers ... we should be asking teachers if they believe race is salient ... something [they] should be interrogating and thinking about [in the classroom]."

So in early fall 2016, he surveyed 450 pre-service and current public-school teachers on their beliefs about race. Despite the small sample size, the preliminary findings from the nationally representative group revealed an intriguing disconnect. Teachers overwhelmingly agreed that race should be discussed in classrooms; they felt woefully unprepared to lead such conversations; and they strongly rejected discussing racial violence, which Milner called "central to working with ... black and brown students" who are frequently the victims of police shootings. "Basically, teachers said, 'You've twisted my arm. We should talk about race. Nope, I don't feel prepared to do
that. And I'm definitely not going to [talk about] violence against black bodies.' That's where we are in 2017."

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With a profession that's characteristically white, female, and middle class—and with students of color and children in poverty rapidly making up the majority of the public-school population—it's become a necessity to have teachers equipped and willing to talk about race and racism. The mere mention of these topics can be awkward and difficult, yet various research findings point to the need to confront the discomfort to improve student learning. Increasingly, that duty has fallen to urban-education programs—a special category of teacher preparation that is reimagining how teaching candidates are prepared and disrupting the race and class stereotypes surrounding urban students and communities.

The dictionary definition of "urban" relates specifically to cities and people who live in them, but population shifts have rendered the term somewhat imprecise. According to federal education data from 2013, some 14 million students (29 percent of total enrollment) attended public

schools in cities during the 2010-11 school year. The city classification, however, ranged from urban areas with a population of less than 100,000 to those with 250,000 residents or more—and spanned school districts as geographically diverse as Anchorage, Alaska, and Baltimore to Nashville and New York.

More commonly, urban schooling is defined by bleak statistics and the prejudices encoded in the adjective "urban" rather than official government categories. A 2015 report from the Center for Reinventing Public Education offered a stark glimpse of the state of urban public schools, including one in four students not graduating from high school in four years. Additionally, a study probing the intersections of race and teaching found the word urban was regularly used as shorthand for unfavorable characteristics associated with students of color.

"People generally [believe] that if it's urban, it's negative," said Milner, the director of Pitt's Center for Urban Education, noting that includes student teachers from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Much of his work—in this case, training undergraduates—is concentrated on cultivating "the skills, the attitudes, and the dispositions" to be effective in urban environments. "That means we think about this notion of urban [and] teachers' belief systems about who these students are and what their capacity happens to be."

A major impetus behind urban programs was to bring more nuance to teacher education, said Camika Royal, an assistant professor and co-director of the Center for Innovation in Urban Education at Loyola University Maryland. Much of the history of education is rooted in psychology with a focus on problem-solving, she explained. Yet urban education is more encompassing—blending psychology with anthropology, sociology, political science, and other disciplines to shed insight on working in urban communities. In Loyola's program, future teachers hone in on knowledge and practices especially relevant to urban schooling and working with racially, culturally, and economically diverse students. Among the core and elective courses offered are "Language, Culture and Literacy," "Neighborhood and Community in Urban America," and "Cultural Diversity in Communication."

"Historically, we've seen education as a blanket thing," she said. "Theories and practices are tried out in lily-white, suburban areas and then [brought] to urban centers that have much less funding [and] other extenuating issues. What urban-education scholars have said is ... consider the context in which [teachers] work and how it may play out differently."

"Students were so explicitly saying your whiteness is preventing you from seeing our humanity."

Royal believes urban education, unlike general teacher education broadly, can give pre-service teachers the tools to navigate race, class, gender, culture, and language, as well as help them grow "an asset-based view" of their students and students' families. Whether she's teaching about curriculum or classroom management, Royal centers on anti-racism and anti-oppression in her urban-education courses—concepts that have special significance in urban schools and are equally applicable in non-urban districts. "In suburban schools where you have populations of black students, those same [biases] are often carried over. Our job is to debunk and to poke holes in their long-held beliefs [and] if we're not upfront and deliberate, it doesn't happen."

Melissa Katz, an urban-education student at The College of New Jersey in Ewing, strongly agrees, and credits her professors and the extensive fieldwork she's completed with unlearning and relearning what it means to be a white teacher in an urban school district. Now in the fourth year of a five-year integrated bachelor's and master's program, Katz student-taught in a North Philadelphia public school, where she was teamed with a white teacher she soon discovered was unequipped to work in an economically disadvantaged, mostly black and Hispanic neighborhood. The assignment was short-lived, but the memories were lasting. "She would talk about wanting to go back to the suburbs and students having alcohol- and drug-addicted parents ... every stereotype you could imagine," Katz said. "Worst of all, she approached [teaching] completely from a deficit mindset ... it's the students who suffered."

The experience forced Katz to ponder the implications of her own racial identity in the classroom. "I definitely felt it on a personal level," she said, adding that self-reflection was crucial when "students were so explicitly saying your whiteness is preventing you from seeing our humanity." Katz further explored the subject in a blog post titled, "Teaching While White," where she aimed to push white educators to "think critically about race, justice, and our own privilege, and most importantly—how these play out in the classroom as teachers."

Relatedly, one area where Katz believes her urban-education program could be strengthened is

in tying what she observed at the individual classroom level to patterns of institutional racism in communities of color—from health care and housing to the environment. Connecting to systemic inequalities, she said, would provide students like herself a "framework for going into a community [unlike] your own." Similarly, Royal and Milner are pressing their education schools to sharpen and improve how teacher prep is packaged and delivered.

Taking a cue from the University of San Francisco's Center for Anti-Oppressive Education, Royal is lobbying for Loyola to incorporate "anti-racist" as part of its identity as a school of education and all of its work: "If this is something [we] stand by, then [formally] adopt that into who we are as an institution," she said. And in Pennsylvania, Milner is working with the state's department of education to approve a special teaching credential for urban teachers. Modeled after the urban certificate program at his university, prospective teachers would complete 15 extra credit hours in addition to the state-mandated requirements for teacher certification—one year of intensive teacher development to "really disrupt and complexify ... what they believe they know about race [and] students or families who live in poverty."

For Katz, approaching the end of her college years, the urban-education program has taught her much more than the mechanics of teaching. It's taught her to think more deeply about race—in white and nonwhite spaces. "One of my placements was in a very wealthy [suburban] district [that] reflected my lived experience. However, I wasn't thinking about the racial aspect, which is hilarious because it was mostly white ... the world we live in doesn't treat white as a race. It's an interesting tension, and I'm learning to sit in [those] uncomfortable places."

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