

Protocols in Practice: Using a Block Party to Create Dissonance and a Space for Tough Conversations

By Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

After ten years of work as a “Critical Friend,” collaboration and reflection are part and parcel of the way I approach teaching and learning. However, after ten years of work, mostly in urban areas, and often in support of projects that are funded and sustained for protracted periods of time, I still see mostly the faces of folks who look like me around the table. In my reflections, I wonder why more colleagues of color aren’t at the table and I question where the colleagues of color I used to see, have gone. I assume these colleagues are still working with kids, often the same kids in the same cities, but I know they are no longer working with me/us, and I ask myself why. My ongoing reflection about our seeming inability as white educators to build lasting bridges across difference with educators and activists of color troubles me. I am troubled because I wonder how we can collaborate with students of color and their families, if we cannot even do it amongst ourselves, and in my wondering, I am always brought back to questions about teaching other peoples’ children. In other words, my thoughts turn to questions of difference based on our race and class and on practices and assumptions supported by the unspoken codes of power that most school practices still support.

Lately, I’ve been thinking a lot about whiteness, my own and others’. I’ve been puzzling over the way we often try to ignore or erase our skin color as something that doesn’t matter, isn’t part of our identity etc. I guess it’s our sense of guilt and wanting to distance ourselves from white supremacy that makes us deny this fundamental marker of our privilege. I understand wanting to deny my white privilege and its largely unquestioned grip on our public schools and the ways “we” do business. It’s uncomfortable accepting that I’m part of the problem and I wish there was a way around it. However, I don’t think I can effectively interrupt the impact of white privilege, if I don’t admit its existence, and therein lies the rub. With that in mind, I began digging into books about whiteness to pull text that would both support and challenge us as whites working to move away from the luxury of guilt and shame that can paralyze us as activists, and toward the development of a pro-active *discourse... that seeks to construct counter-hegemonic pedagogies, oppositional identity formations, and social policies that refuse, resist and transform existing structures of domination...in school sites (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995)*. I know that was a mouthful, but to me it means developing new ways to talk and act as a white educator so I can work together with all others committed to doing whatever it takes to interrupt the systemic inequities that are the hallmarks of teaching and learning in our schools.

Thinking and talking about whiteness in public is uncomfortable, at best. Given the thorniness of the topic, I decided to begin with quotes rather than a full text. When using provocative quotes, I generally use a Block Party protocol to organize the conversation.

(Please note, this activity was previously called a ‘Tea Party’. Recently, the mass appeal of the old title was questioned by some colleagues since the image of a tea party conjures up either genteel parties of women, or Mad-Hatters and White rabbits, hence the name change.)

The Block Party and these quotes are not offered as a silver bullet where one shot transforms everyone concerned, or as a single dose of medicine to be endured in the hope of a cure. Rather the activity and quotes are offered as one way to hold a space for the start of the tough conversations that we need to have to work together in support of our efforts to provide equitable outcomes for each student in our schools.

Block Party: A Pre-reading Text-Based Activity

This activity can be used with a variety of texts, poems, quotes, articles...whole books. It works well with large groups.

Step 1: Facilitator writes quotes on index cards or colored paper prior to session. You may choose one quote per participant, or repeat some quotes.

Step 2: Participants randomly select quotes/cards and spend a few minutes reflecting upon their quote's meaning for them and their work. **(3 minutes)**

Step 3: Participants mingle and share quotes in pairs. Participants are encouraged to share with three other participants in 5 minute segments. **(15 minutes)**

Step 4: Form triads or quads and share quotes and insights about the text and its implications for our work. **(12-15 minutes)**

Step 5: Whole group sharing of ideas and questions raised by the experience. This can be done popcorn style or as a round, but is usually not a conversation. **(10-12 minutes)**

Step 6: Facilitator shares the source of the quotes, posting the link, distributing the article etc. for future work. **(1 minute)**

Step 7: Debrief the process **(5 minutes)**

Note: Using quotes from longer pieces can open up the conversation in large, mixed groups where students and family members might have previously been excluded from the discussion of the material because it was judged as too long, complex etc.

Adapted by D. Bambino from Kylee Beers' Tea Party, pre-reading strategy www.mcte.org/resources/beers.html

Quotes for a Block Party that Can Support Us as We Talk about Race

1. *Racial Literacy: "Talking Even When "the Smooth-Sounding Words Fail Us"*

"Racial literacy is a set of social competencies. Being racially literate means being able to interact with others to challenge undemocratic practices...One must view racial issues through a critical lens that attends to current and institutional aspects of racism. Racially literate students understand that various forms of racism have developed historically and that they can contest these practices. I echo...Cornel West (1993), who entreats us to develop civic minded consciousness:

"We need leaders—neither saints nor sparkling television personalities—who can situate themselves within a larger historical narrative of this country and our world, who can grasp the complex dynamics of our people hood and imagine a future grounded in the best of our past, yet who are attuned to the frightening obstacles that now perplex us."

- Cornel West, *Race Matters*, New York: Vintage (1993) in *Talking Race in the Classroom*. Jane Bolgatz. (2005) New York: Teachers College Press.

2. "White privilege was so ingrained in my school experience that hardly a single thing about my education was untainted by it. Whether it was the racialized placement of students into advanced or remedial tracks totally irrespective of actual ability, or the way in which extracurricular opportunities, like drama or debate, were such "white spaces," with very little opportunity in practical terms for nonwhites to participate, the trend was obvious and persistent."

- *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* by Tim Wise

3. "I'm not interested in anybody's guilt. Guilt is a luxury that we can no longer afford. I know you didn't do it, and I didn't do it either, but I am responsible for it because I am a man and a citizen of this country and you are responsible for it, too, for the very same reason... Anyone who is trying to be conscious must begin...to dismiss the vocabulary which we've used so long to cover it up, to lie about the way things are."

- "Words of a Native Son," *Playboy*, 1964, James Baldwin

4. "When I went away to college I considered myself a hip liberal, aware of racism and committed to fighting it. And yet within a few weeks of my arrival to Tulane ...I had largely missed the meaning...during freshman orientation,... ..(when)we were warned to stay away from certain neighborhoods, to travel in groups as well, because not all New Orleans was as safe as Uptown, where the university was located...the warnings were all in regard to mostly Black and poor neighborhoods, it was highly racialized and selective in the way that prioritized the well being of whites to the exclusion of persons of color---since after all the latter might also have been at risk in certain white spaces."

- *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* by Tim Wise

5. "What societies really, ideally want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change."

- "A Talk to Teachers," *Saturday Review*, December 21, 1963, James Baldwin

6. "A few years ago, I was checking into a hotel with a Black, male colleague. When he asked the white man behind the counter for our rooms, the clerk ignored him and spoke to me, I was stunned. That evening, in talking about the incident, my colleague was surprised that I was surprised; he assumed that I knew that such treatment was routine for him. As I began to notice the different ways we were treated in ordinary situations, I realized how frequently he, and other colleagues of color, were treated as if they were invisible while I was noticed and treated with respect."

- "White Men and the Denial of Racism," Cooper Thompson in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Antisemitism, Sexism, Heterosexism, Ableism, and Classism*. ed Maurianne Adams et al. New York: Routledge.

7. "To say that it (racism) is not our fault does not relieve us of responsibility, however. We may not have polluted the air, but we need to take responsibility, along with others, for cleaning it up. Each of us needs to look at our own behavior. Am I perpetuating and reinforcing the negative images so pervasive in our culture, or am I seeking to challenge them? If I have not been exposed to positive images of marginalized groups, am I seeking them out, expanding my own knowledge base for myself and my children? Am I acknowledging and examining my own prejudices, my own rigid categorizations of others, thereby minimizing the adverse impact they might have on my interactions with those I have categorized? Unless we engage in these and other conscious acts of reflection and reeducation, we easily repeat the process with our children. We teach what we were taught. The unexamined prejudices of the parents passed on to the children. It is not our fault, but it is our responsibility to interrupt this cycle."

- "Defining Racism: Can We Talk?" Beverly Tatum Daniel in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Antisemitism, Sexism, Heterosexism, Ableism, and Classism*. ed Maurianne Adams et al. New York: Routledge.

8. "Oppression refers to systemic constraints on groups that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant. Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people's choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules...oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life."

- "Five Faces of Oppression," Iris Marion Young in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Antisemitism, Sexism, Heterosexism, Ableism, and Classism*. ed Maurianne Adams et al. New York: Routledge.

9. "Something happens in school, especially in elementary school, that forms and changes people in racial terms. Further, racial identities, both those assigned to children and those they choose, affect their schooling experiences. How does this happen? Why for instance, are there racial gaps in achievement? Given that racist theories of genetic inferiority have been thoroughly disproved, we must go beyond theories about innate abilities or capacities. Given a growing body of literature that shows racial minorities value education as much as their higher-achieving white peers, if not more, theories that suggest that gaps are due to family values are also inadequate. What goes on inside school buildings and in schoolyards? What kind of messages do students give and receive? What kinds of practices and institutional cultures and structures lead to these differences in outcomes?"

- *Race in the Schoolyard: Negotiating the Color Line in Classrooms and Communities*. Amanda E. Lewis. New Brunswick: Rutgers.

10. "Talking together is a core activity with which to develop racial literacy. Talk is a powerful tool. It develops our ideas and influences who we are. Talk is also a form of action. Playwright Bertold Brecht said that art was a hammer with which to shape reality. I believe that talk, like art, does not simply mirror reality; it influences reality... Talk gives shape to our ideas. When we talk, we articulate ideas that have not been completely formed. Psychologist Lev Vygotsky(1986) explained, "Thought is restructured as it is transformed into speech. It is not expressed but completed in the word"(p.251). Talk helps us complete our thoughts. Language enables us to articulate notions we might not have fully seen or understood. Listening and speaking can help us know in new ways. New awareness can lead to new feelings. New emotions, in turn, can lead to new ways of acting...Moreover, not talking is its own form of action...Silence denies us the opportunity to try out and share new ideas, positions, or ways of working together."

- *Talking Race in the Classroom*, Jane Bolgatz (2005) New York: Teachers College Press

11. "A Black male graduate student who is also a special education teacher in a predominantly Black community is talking about his experiences in predominantly White university classes: 'There comes a moment in every class where we have to discuss "The Black Issue" and what's appropriate education for Black children. I tell you, I'm tired of arguing with those White people, because they won't listen. Well, I don't know if they really don't listen or if they just don't believe you. It seems like if you can't quote Vygotsky or something, then you don't have any validity to speak about your own kids. Anyway, I'm not bothering with it anymore, now I'm just in it for the grade.'"

- *The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children*. Lisa D. Delpit in *Facing Racism in Education* ed. Nitza M. Hidalgo et al. Harvard Educational series, Reprint 21.

12. "...a well intended white school administration in Portland, Oregon tried to achieve integration through racial assimilation. Ironically, by ignoring black cultural differences and personal individuality—by taking a "colorblind" approach to integration—the administration only perpetuated an insidious kind of invisibility: Day after day...Black students came off the bus to a setting where the goal was to render them invisible. And the more invisible they became the greater the satisfaction of the school personnel that the integration program was succeeding!

- *The Invisible Children: School Integration in American Society*, Ray Rist (1978), Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Black Visibility in a Multi-Ethnic High School, James Stanlaw and Alan Peshkin in *Class, Race & Gender in American Education* ed. Lois Weiss (1988). New York: SUNY Press.

13. "...I believe that we, as white educators, need to make our whiteness public. With white colleagues and colleagues of color, we need to engage in critical dialogue and develop a discourse... that seeks to construct counter-hegemonic pedagogies, oppositional identity formations, and social policies that refuse, resist and transform existing structures of domination primarily in school sites but also in other cultural sites within the [global] arena.

- Introduction: Exploring Connections to Build a Critical Multiculturalism in C.E. Sleeter & P.McLaren eds. *Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Difference*, Albany: Suny Press.
- *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity with White teachers*. Alice McIntyre (1997). Albany: SUNY Press

14. "Privileging their own feelings over the conditions and feelings of people of color was a strategy for the participants to ignore their own whiteness... Roman (1993) raises the important question of what educators should do 'when whites... feel ashamed to be implicated in its (racism) structural practice--- ashamed to face those who have suffered racism.' Her response to that question is an important one: 'Ashamed contradictory white subjects are not absolved of their responsibility to build effective social alternatives to structural racism... If whites are to become empowered critical analysts of... privileged world in which their racial interests function, such privileges must become the objects of analyses... (so) subjects (can) move from paralyzing shame and guilt to stances in which we/they take effective responsibility and action for disinvesting in racial privilege.' "

- Roman,L. in *Views beyond the border country: Raymond Williams and Cultural Politics*. NY: Routledge.
- *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity with White teachers*. Alice McIntyre (1997). Albany: SUNY Press ■

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