Rac(e)ing to Class: Discussion Guide

2015

Pedagogical Goal

This discussion guide is designed to help leaders facilitate meaningful conversations about the ideas of H. Richard Milner IV about poverty, race, and American education. Milner is the Helen Faison Professor of Urban Education and director of the Center for Urban Education at the University of Pittsburgh School for Education. He researches effective teaching methods and professional development approaches for teachers, schools, and districts seeking to implement teaching strategies that deal with race and, more recently, the intersection of race and poverty.

Students have been assigned his book:

- *Rac(e)ing to Class: Confronting Poverty and Race in Schools and Classrooms* (Harvard Education Press, 2015)

Students might also wish to review an April 24, 2015 NPR interview with him called “Uncomfortable Conversations: Talking about Race in the Classroom,” which can be accessed online at:


Main Themes of the Book

Here are some—though certainly not all—of the topics covered in *Rac(e)ing to Class*:

1. Poverty has an enormous effect on education and, in America, race has an enormous relationship to poverty. As Milner said in an April 24, 2015 NPR interview, “We can’t have conversations about poverty if we’re not having serious conversations about race.”

2. Practices such as assigning homework, can end up being biased, because they rely on resources and opportunities—such as free time and parents’ availability—that some students have much more of than others. So, as Milner
sees it, something as seemingly straightforward as the “assigning of, expectations for, and assessment of homework” is an equity issue.

3. Educators, in Milner’s view, do have it in their power to address such inequalities, at least to a certain extent. Milner suggests many students of color who are poor could get better educations than they do if their teachers and school administrators took their learning circumstances into account more creatively and constructively.

Possible Discussion Questions

Before delving into the ideas and controversies, you may want to engage students in reflection on the terms Milner uses in his analysis; specifically, two sets of terms:

a) Poverty, socioeconomic status, and class. Milner primarily uses the term poverty as his unit of analysis, though at times he uses socioeconomic status, in particular when he references empirical research findings. Clearly these terms are related, though not interchangeable. How do you define poverty and socioeconomic status? What does each construct encourage sensitivity to that the other may miss? Which term do you prefer for education policy discussions? Why?

b) Race and ethnicity. Milner primarily speaks of race, though sometimes he speaks of ethnicity. Clearly these terms are interrelated. How do you define them? How does each sensitize us to important aspects of education? Which do you feel should be used and when?

Here are some—though certainly not all—of the questions you might use to spark conversations around the book. The questions are grouped into four categories.

(1) The reader’s career or volunteer experiences in education, including observations of colleagues and students:

a) Were you ever confronted by examples (direct or indirect) which made you aware of the challenges poverty introduces into education? What examples do you recall? Did you attribute those challenges to poverty, race, or both?

b) Did you ever observe colleagues trying to make special efforts to reach diverse students who were not progressing at the same pace as their peers despite effort and ability?

c) Have you tried to make special efforts to reach students who were not progressing at the same pace as their peers due to their race, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic status rather than by ability or effort?

d) Have you worked in a school where teachers and administrators were grateful not to have a “race problem”? Do you agree that there was no “race problem”?
e) Were there policies, practices, or rules where you worked or volunteered that may have affected different students differently, based on their race, ethnicity, and/or class?

f) Was the taught or assumed/implied curriculum equitable in the way it represented the different communities from which the students came (for example, referring to people as “native born”, “ex pat”, or “immigrant”)?

(2) The reader’s individual experiences with education:

a) How do you believe your race and ethnicity have affected your own experiences of schooling to date?

b) How do you believe your comparative income level has affected your own experiences of schooling to date?

c) How, in your own experience, have race and ethnicity on the one hand, and income and socioeconomic status on the other, interacted to influence your own experiences of schooling to date?

d) Did you grow up in poverty or were there students who were living in poverty in class/school with you? How did you define poverty or how was it defined for you/about you? Did you ever feel that your teachers and school administrators were refusing to recognize what made school difficult for students from low-income families?

e) Did it seem to you, as a student, that other students with more money or who lived in better neighborhoods had an unfair advantage when it came to understanding schoolwork and completing homework? In what specific ways?

f) Did you ever have a teacher who found a way to create welcoming and inclusive classrooms for students with diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds?

(3) Making use of Milner’s book:

a) Did Race(ing) to Class change how you think about race and poverty? If so, what did you change your mind about and what was it that changed your mind?

b) Milner has observed that teachers would rather not talk about race and poverty and how connected poverty is to race. Does your work experience confirm this observation? Have you ever discussed these issues with your colleagues or administrators? Have your efforts been welcomed? Rebuffed? What specific responses—and reasons for those responses—were given?

c) Milner promises to “specify practices that educators—especially teachers—can employ to more effectively meet the needs of all learners.” Which specific
practices did you find in the book that you are most excited to integrate into your own practice or to support through policy, programs, and/or teacher preparation? Which, if any, of the practices Milner suggests strike you as less practical or perhaps beside the point?

d) Milner advocates that it is the school’s responsibility to understand and make constructive use of what daily life is like for poor students of color. This includes how they talk, what they read and watch, where they work, where they hang out, and what goes on in the neighborhood (including, in one of his examples, a robbery that took place around the corner from a school where he was consulting). Do you agree that this is what schools should do? Do you think it’s possible for schools to do this? If you agree, what are the greatest opportunities you see for doing this? The greatest obstacles to your being competent and comfortable in this work?

e) In the April 24, 2015 NPR interview, Milner suggested that teachers find ways to turn what seems to be an educational liability into an asset. For example, a teacher might note that a student is having trouble keeping up in class, very likely because she’s working a shift at McDonald’s every night to help keep her family afloat. But, says Milner, the teacher might also view this as a demonstration of the student’s “capacity to balance her schoolwork and her part-time job” and see if there is some way to help this student with her juggling act. What do you identify in students from families experiencing poverty that you feel can be viewed as assets that can help them in school?

f) If a high school student is helping her family earn a living but still not learning how to read past a sixth-grade level, is this a necessary trade-off? A commendable trade-off? How can concerned educators recognize students’ outside commitments and circumstances while still holding high expectations for their academic progress?

g) How can we, as educators, tell if what we are doing is making things better for students of color and students from poor backgrounds? After reading Milner’s book, which metrics would you use to decide and why?

(4) Our collective experience as part of the HGSE learning community:

a) How might race, ethnicity, and different wealth backgrounds affect our dynamics as co-learners in the HGSE community?

b) How might these differences make it more complicated for the student body, faculty, and staff to build a cohesive learning community at the HGSE?
c) How might these forms of difference amongst students, faculty, and staff be put to positive use in building a cohesive learning community at the HGSE?