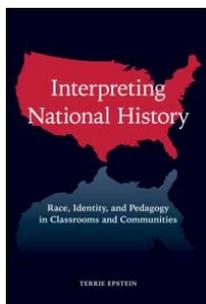


Professional Book Review

Epstein, T. (2009). *Interpreting National History: Race, Identity, and Pedagogy in Classrooms and Communities*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis. 155 pp., ISBN: 978-0415960835 (hc) \$35.95.

Reviewed by Bonni Gourneau, University of North Dakota, U. S. A.



This book examines the role that classroom pedagogies and racial identities play in shaping knowledge and beliefs about U.S. history. Terri Epstein, the author and history educator, advocates that teachers, textbooks, policy documents, and teacher educators should teach national U.S. history to promote social justice, including the multiple ways that individuals and groups have struggled across racial lines to extend freedom and equality to all people. Epstein provides a guide for teachers when they teach students about race and rights in elementary, middle, and secondary classrooms. Included in the text are examples of positive and harmful ways teachers choose to present a U.S. history curriculum and the role that racism and inequality have played and continue to play in our national history and contemporary society.

The author supports teaching U.S. history for social justice as a means for teaching students to critique historical and contemporary texts as citizens in a democratic society. For teachers this involves presenting the “facts or truths” of what happened in history, who benefited, who was silenced, and who made these decisions. The teaching strategy also involves managing classroom discussions and activities about racial and other forms of privilege and oppression. Talking about racism is difficult in multiracial classrooms that exist today for the reason that all teachers, students, and parents have different interpretations on what happened in history.

For this study Epstein and a research team of doctoral students interviewed a total of six teachers including two fifth, two eighth, and two eleventh grade teachers. Sixty students, 10 from each classroom, were involved in the research as well as 24 parents of the 60 students. The researchers also observed many lessons in the teachers’ classrooms. The students’ parents were interviewed to learn about their interpretations of history and contemporary society and the stories about the historical experiences of relatives and historical figures they discussed with their children at home.

Initially the book begins with a look into the political and cultural contexts which have guided the teaching and learning of history in and out of the school environment. Attention is given to racial-ethnic, gender, and religious identities that have shaped people’s interpretations of history and society. It also gives the profile of the history of the community where the study took place. Attention is

then turned to how the six White teachers in the study thought and taught about racial groups, race relations, and individuals' rights in U.S. history and contemporary society. The next section analyzed the effects of children's and adolescents' racial identities and classroom pedagogies on the students' interpretations of history. This was achieved by analyzing the students' beginning-of-the-year explanations of individual historical people and events, racial groups, race relations, the expansive or exclusionary nature of rights, and the themes which characterize U.S. history. At the end of the year explanations, concepts, and themes were reassessed to see what changes occurred from the beginning of the year. Some U.S. history topics included the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, Enslavement and Reconstruction, The Revolutionary War, World War II, and the Civil Rights Movement. Some of the significant people in U.S. history discussed were Christopher Columbus, the Founding Fathers, Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X.

In the next section of the book, the parents' explanations and interpretations of U.S. history were discussed and examined, and this was followed by the constraints put on teachers who are interested in teaching history for social justice. A variety of examples are also given on what teachers tried when presenting a social justice-oriented approach to teaching history. These ideas could be used to open up classroom discussions and lessons so that students could discuss race and injustices, which could further their learning about race and history.

Epstein explains that many times teachers purposefully avoid discussions about racism, sexism, or discrimination for a variety of reasons. These may include trying to avoid conflict with students, parents, and community members; needing to focus on the approved curriculum; and not wanting to lose control of student discussions and behaviors. With younger children, discussions of racism have been avoided because it seems too complex, too emotionally difficult, and too offensive to parents and it may create hard feelings amongst students in the classroom. Many teachers also feel they are not adequately trained to handle discussions about race. However, according to Epstein, by avoiding the discussion about racism and other forms of injustice in U.S. history, teachers present an inaccurate and dishonest representation of the nation's development. Another problem discussed with teaching about U.S. history is the textbooks that are used in schools. Too often they focus on the contributions, experiences, and interpretations of privileged White men while marginalizing or even ignoring the contributions from people of color and women.

For many reasons this book would be a valuable resource for social studies educators across all levels of education. I learned a great deal from the many voices in the book as well as gained confidence in my ability to tackle race and inequality lessons in my own classroom. Epstein supports the need for teachers to be willing to take risks by opening themselves up to self-reflection on these difficult topics. With the vivid examples of racism, inequality, and discrimination, classroom teachers and teacher educators have a starting point to having social justice conversations. This book supports teachers talking about

race in history because by choosing not to they are misleading the American youth about their nation's historical legacy and the opportunity to relate it to our contemporary society. I will definitely use this book in my social studies teacher education courses at the University of North Dakota.