

*The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism*

Debra Van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, ISBN: 0847688623, 240 pp.

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*The First "R"* is an extremely rich ethnographic study of children's racial understandings and constructions of meaning, in a large racially and ethnically mixed preschool in an urban area. Van Ausdale spent a year observing the fifty-eight children in the preschool, gaining access to the children's understandings by becoming a supportive but non-authoritative presence. The authors' numerous vignettes reveal a world of unexpected sophistication and complexity in these three- to five-year-olds.

Van Ausdale and Feagin effectively refute three common views of children's relationship to race—that young children are incapable of racial prejudice or the use of race to hurt or exclude other children; that young children are not sufficiently cognitively developed to grasp adult meanings of race; and that children's understanding of race and skin color reflects a color-blind ideal in which race is overlooked as a superficial characteristic. The authors' argument on the latter two points is set within a discussion of the role of race in the broader American society. They are surely correct to argue that race is currently a deeply socially and personally important identity in American life. Their observations show children operating with complex understandings of race and its relation to skin color and other phenotypic characteristics, to parental ancestry, and to cultural markers associated with race. For instance, a white child tells a black/white child that she cannot celebrate Kwanzaa because she is not Black; the mixed child replies that she is Black because her father and grandparents are black. The children also often understand the differential value placed on different racial groups, and, in any case, generally understand race as a socially meaningful category and personally significant identity.

Occasionally the children use these understandings in a hurtful manner, as when a three-year-old white (but 1/4 Asian) child moves her cot away from a black child saying "I can't sleep next to a nigger" or the non-Asian children disproportionately target Asian children for teasing and fighting. The children's more complex understanding of race allows for a form of racism or proto-racism excluded by the view that children do not understand race. But such proto-racism is not typical among the children studied. The authors sometimes imply that the meanings of race constructed by the children are generally supportive of the racial hierarchy in the wider society; but this is at best an oversimplification of the very complexity they are concerned to emphasize. The white child in the

previous paragraph does not imply any devaluing of Blackness in his remark about Kwanzaa. The children also use racial and ethnic designations to exclude, but not always with the same value system as the outer society; for example, a mixed white/Latina girl excludes a Chinese-American girl from play on the grounds that she does not speak Spanish, or does not speak two languages, neither of which is a predominantly valued attribute in American society.

Even incidents that seem to smack of racial hierarchy often contain a complexity not captured by the idea that the children's evolving racial meaning-making is socialization in racism. For example, two children remark to a 4-year-old white child, Renee, that her skin is darker than theirs. (One of the children is black/white.) Renee does not seem pleased with this observation and says, "I'm darker, but I'm still white"; she expresses concern over this matter in other conversations also. The authors plausibly observe that Renee is not confused about the permanence of skin color, as some theories would have it, but "her struggle seems to revolve around a desire to remain a white person in the social sense of the term." Elsewhere the authors imply that any attempt to maintain a white identity is an attempt to hold onto the valued status attached to whiteness in the outer society. But a small white child's striving to understand the boundaries of racial identities (how race relates to skin color, for example) does not necessarily, though it may often in fact, require having a stake in the privileges of whiteness. Regarding Renee specifically, a few months after this incident she informed her mother that she wanted to be Black. The mother reported to Van Ausdale that Renee and her family were close to a black family with whom they had lived when Renee was a baby. The authors' note Renee's complex use of race, but not that it fails to align itself in any clear way with racial hierarchy.

The authors find (and other research bears out) that African-American children tend to have a more nuanced understanding of race than white children. (There are only four African-Americans in the sample.) For example, they are more interested in and aware of the range of skin tones belonging to a single racial group. For a poster made of handprints, a black boy picks out dark brown for one hand and light brown for the other, showing an adult who questions this choice both the front and back of his hand in explanation.

At the same time, the black children seem particularly resistant to the mixed-race children's claim to a mixed identity. The authors report at several points on a remarkable four-year-old named Corinne whose mother is African and father, white American. Corinne understands herself to be mixed, to have been born in Africa, to be an American, and not to be of the category generally designated by "African-American." She patiently, and when necessary, heatedly, explains all these accurate self-understandings to

various children and adults who question one or another of them. This includes a black boy who refuses to believe that Corinne's father is indeed her father. The single African-American teacher is reported as resisting a child's accurate self-designation as mixed (white and Latina).

*The First "R"* presents the reader with a fascinating glimpse into the world of children making meaning about race. Its discussions of particular incidents are nuanced and insightful.

However, the authors have a tendency to impose on these insights a rather restricted understanding of race which comes close to collapsing it into racism. Racial identity can be socially and personally meaningful without buying into racial hierarchy.

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*African-Centered Pedagogy: Developing Schools of Achievement for African American Children*

Peter C. Murrell, Jr. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, ISBN: 0791452921, 256 pp.

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President Bush's "Leave no child behind" agenda focuses on closing the achievement gap and improving the success of those students who have not performed well academically. The "gap" typically refers to the disparity that occurs between standardized test scores of students of color, "minority disadvantaged" (Roach & Dervarics, 2002, p. 26) and Whites. They are believed to be quintessential indicators of a student's academic preparation and future success.

Murrell's book, *African-Centered Pedagogies*, becomes critically important in "teasing out" the discourse of underachievement, the tacit systems of inequities, and complex issues that shape and characterize school achievement. Consequently, his departure from the prevailing philosophy of standardization advocates that attention should be given to the issue of within-school deficits. The notion of standardized testing is one of many issues that are addressed, and consequently problematized in part one of the two-part, ten-chapter book. Although, testing has been ballyhooed (by the current administration) as the flesh-colored band-aid that will fix the