



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1994 Volume IV: Racism and Nativism in American Political Culture

What Am I Equal To?

Guide for Curriculum Unit 94.04.02
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Barbara J. Fields defines race as “neither biology nor an idea absorbed into biology by Lamarckian inheritance,” but as an ideology. And, as an ideology, “lives on today” only because “we continue to create it today.” While disagreeing with the economic basis for Field’s theory, I do agree that the concept of race, like that of any political or organizational affiliation, is not biologically determined, and needs to be continually recreated. Further, I consider race to be a subset in a larger arena of differentiation called specialness.

Much harm has come from specialness. A member of a special group, protected by his own sense of impunity, is able to do and say certain things without having to take conscious, or personal, responsibility for them. Furthermore, he is frequently rewarded with the moral high ground, its comforting righteousness yet another buffer from the truth. In U.S. history, political leaders have often tolerated or even encouraged American to think they were more “special”-that is, superior-if they were white, or Protestant, or male, etc. How can this toleration, even encouragement, of certain harmful special groups be understood in view of this country’s stated intention that “All men are created equal”? Are we all absolute hypocrites? As a high school U.S. history teacher I need to address these issues. Moreover, if this agreement on inequality is, as Fields suggests, continually recreated, then each of us needs to become aware of his own participation in this recreation if any discussion is to be meaningful. Such an examination would be particularly useful for my students, whose ideas of personal affiliation are either still being formed or so fresh as to be easily influenced.

Another point: Perhaps it is inevitable that a person needs to feel special. If so, then there are two important questions to be asked. (1) How can we channel the need to feel special into areas that are helpful to others, and to society? For example, a special talent in science might lead to a useful life as a research physician (as opposed to inventing new ways of torturing political prisoners). (2) How can we legitimately feel special while also recognizing and respecting the way others are also special? In other words, how can we teach that ascribed valuations are not absolute?

Accordingly, I have prepared a curriculum unit, “What Am I Equal To?” This unit includes six basic, cumulative themes. The application of these themes is achieved through four specific objectives. Here is a list of the themes and objectives.

THEMES

1. Specialness is learned.

2. Specialness has value.
3. This value is culturally determined.
4. Specialness may be used as justification for notions of superiority, for divisiveness, and for oppression.
5. Those who use—or misuse—specialness in this way are generally unconscious of doing so.
6. We can begin to change this misuse by raising the individual's level of conscious awareness.

OBJECTIVES

1. To propose an alternative to the customary “biological” definition of race, to encourage students to invent their own series of distinctions, new races or arenas of specialness.
2. To encourage students to become aware of the prevalence of their own specialistic tendencies, so that they may learn to take personal responsibility for their behavior based on such distinctions.
3. To encourage students to become aware of the prevalence of affiliations of specialness that exist in the culture.
4. To demonstrate how prevailing belief systems have been used historically to justify social concepts of specialness.

(Recommended for U.S. History, grades 10-12, and Social Development, grades 9-12)

Keywords

Racial Prejudice American Race Relations History Racism

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