

Book Review

Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race, 1900-1954

Zoë Burkholder

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That *race* is a socially constructed and historically contingent idea is, today, beyond dispute. Scholars have examined racial formation in the United States for several decades. Having now been a staple of the larger field of American history for some time, one might be excused from wondering if the study of racial formation had peaked some time ago. Fortunately, Zoë Burkholder has made a rigorous, concise, and valuable contribution to this complex and thriving branch of scholarly work.

With *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race, 1900-1954*, Burkholder has discovered a neglected area in the field of racial formation. Previous studies on modern America, which now count as required readings for graduate students, have tended to focus on labour unions and immigrant communities. *Color in the Classroom* reminds scholars in the field of modern U.S. history that the school system has been one of *the* most important and one of the largest social institutions in the country's history. Burkholder adds a great work to a growing cadre of scholars still exploring the intricacies of U.S. racial alchemy.

She draws her evidence from a breadth of sources ranging from places as prominent as New York City, and inconspicuous as Terre Haute, Indiana. The primary sources listed in the bibliography and endnotes show extensive archival manuscript collections, periodicals, books, and pamphlets. This choice of sources allows her to bridge intellectual and institutional histories. Burkholder places a long list of professional teaching journals—covering science, literature, and social science—at the center of her research.

Color in the Classroom tracks how American definitions of race and culture changed over the first half of the 20th century. Burkholder focuses on the roles played by prominent anthropologists and their effect on the nation's public school system. In the 1930s and 1940s, well-known anthropologists such as Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead worked directly with K-12 educators to introduce their newly formulated scientific definition of race. Leading white educators then worked at the local and national levels to promote changing notions of what was known as *tolerance education*.

Burkholder argues that it was through the pairing of socially engaged anthropologists and K-12 school teachers that “racial discourse underwent a paradigmatic shift during the span of World War II” (p. 6). Prior to the Second World War, American teachers applied race to demark various European nationalities. From 1900 to 1938, race was conflated with nationality, and most lesson plans centered on progressive-era Americanization efforts. Teachers focused

exclusively on communities of European descent, ignoring students of African, Mexican, Asian, or Native American descent. During this period, teachers often sought to introduce the various cultural “gifts” (pp. 20-21) that the different European immigrant groups brought to the United States, which tended to essentialize those groups.

World War II is the hinge that Burkholder’s argument hangs upon. Chapters 2 and 3 cover first, Boas and second, his students Benedict and Mead. Boas took it as his mission to re-educate the nation’s teachers. He wanted the nation to understand that the biological concept of race determined neither intelligence nor morality. Springing into action in the late 1930s, he launched the first effort to popularize the new scientific and anthropological definition of race and culture. This, he argued, was the key to preserving democracy in a world under threat from Nazism. While future scholars such as Stephan Jay Gould (1981) would continue Boas’ battle against eugenicists and biological determinists, Benedict and Mead took up Boas’ torch in the 1940s. Perhaps idealistically, Benedict pushed hard to make teachers adopt the scientific definitions of race and culture in their lesson plans. But while Benedict initially positioned herself as the critic of the most simplistic and celebratory versions of tolerance education (by asserting that the concept of race should be dealt with head-on instead of ignored), both she and Mead ended up supporting the rhetoric of colorblindness. Mead, in these years, allied herself with the prominent educator Rachel Davis DuBois. Together, they sought to address individual attitudes through such methods as having students bring in culturally representative foods to the classroom. Face-to-face encounters would then reduce prejudice, they imagined. At one event, DuBois and Mead planned to have individuals from different immigrant and racial communities attend a festival and literally hold hands and sing. If that sounds naïve, it is because it was. Mead changed her approach later in her life.

Although many teachers adopted lesson plans based on scientific definitions of race and culture, the majority of teachers proved incapable of translating these complex ideas to their students, many of whom were either confused or simply refused to adopt non-racist attitudes. But, due in large part to terminology confusion (and the utter complexity of race and culture), Burkholder illustrates that between 1939 and 1945 race became equated with skin color rather than nationality as before. “‘Race’ as defined by anthropologists,” Burkholder writes, “reified the biological division between whites and nonwhites even as it asserted that race was a meaningless concept” (p. 127). It is true that there were many teachers who viewed their profession as a mission with the goal of securing democracy and national unity. The atrocities of World War II stoked these sentiments, but neither mass slaughter nor teachers’ righteous zeal was enough to maintain Boas’ attack on racism in the United States. In the late 1940s, most teachers simply removed discussion of race from their classrooms. “In other words,” writes Burkholder, “teachers learned what race was from Benedict and how not to speak about it from Mead” (p. 94).

Perhaps one of the most telling aspects of the text is a theme that is implied throughout. Through the many examples from teaching journals and classroom lesson plans, *Color in the Classroom* illustrates just how entrenched racism and white supremacy has been in U.S. history. The author admits that students did not always accept their teacher’s lessons. That is to be expected. But some of the best-intentioned teachers fell victim (often accidentally) to their own racist assumptions. One English teacher in Ashland, Ohio, had children put on black face and “mammy dresses” (p. 128) to parade around on stage in the hope that this would inculcate cultural appreciation. Other teachers proved that it was possible to avoid such farces, however. Burkholder convincingly illustrates that “*when educators have treated race as an explicit topic*

for analysis and discussion they engendered creative and original ways to counteract racial prejudice through the institution of public schools” (p. 179, emphasis added).

The cloak of science gave brave teachers protection to discuss race openly during but not after World War II. By the 1950s, both the political left and right overtly attacked tolerance education. The chilling gaze of McCarthyism swept over the nation’s classrooms as it did over other areas of American life. Discussions of culture—the simplistic and celebratory variety that Benedict despised—remained. As teachers removed discussing race explicitly from their lesson plans, a paradigm centered on culture replaced Boas’ pedagogy of race and culture. *Tolerance education* was replaced with *cultural relativism*, first, and *multiculturalism*, second. Teachers were most likely to instruct their students only *as individuals*, who should act respectably so that no one had any reason to dislike them. With the *Brown v. Board* (1954) ruling, psychology replaced anthropology as the discipline of choice to explain racial prejudice. The ideology of colorblindness had arrived; it has remained supreme for decades after. As other scholars have highlighted, *Brown* and the rhetoric of colorblindness placed the burden of dealing with racism on single individuals from communities of color. Burkholder does not state so explicitly, but *Color in the Classroom* goes a long way toward explaining how American *attitudes* shifted so dramatically in the mid-20th century while public policy did not necessarily follow.

Education scholars of all types will benefit immensely from the book. For the historian, Burkholder taps into several important themes in addition to racial formation: how politics is always intertwined with schooling, progressive-era science and society, the intellectual history of the United States, the history of social reform, the long civil rights movement, school desegregation, and the effects of the Cold War. Academics in fields dealing with contemporary policy, pedagogy, and curriculum development will learn much, too. Hopefully, the book will become required reading in American teacher education programs. Advanced students especially will find it a helpful work both in content and in execution—the footnotes, bibliography, and conclusion are excellent resources. In essence, this is useful history; even Supreme Court justices have something to learn. In the conclusion, the author does not shy away from hinting at some of the contemporary lessons that *Color in the Classroom* offers, such as when she chastises Chief Justice John Roberts for his ahistorical and colorblind ruling in *Parents Involved in Schools v. Seattle School District* (2007).

References

- Brown v. Board of Educ., 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
Gould, S. J. (1981). *The mismeasure of man*. New York: W.W. Norton.
Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1, 551 U.S. 701 (2007).

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