



UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE AT SCALE

A Project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform

A Deeper Analysis of “Culture” in Education

An Interview with Mica Pollock



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About Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale

This interview was produced for the Web site *Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale*, a project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. The site grew out of a forum convened by the Institute in 2006 which brought together a group of prominent education advocates and stakeholders to create a powerful, integrated framework that would reconcile divergent ways of defining educational equity and excellence, along with differing – and sometimes competing – views about which strategies work best to promote high-quality education for all students.

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Interview conducted by Heather Harding, principal associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

About the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University


The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is a national policy-research and reform-support organization at Brown University that focuses on improving conditions and outcomes in urban schools, especially those serving disadvantaged children. The Institute works through partnerships with school districts and school reform networks and in collaboration with national and local organizations skilled in educational research, policy, and effective practices to offer an array of tools and strategies to help districts strengthen their local capacity to provide and sustain high-quality education for all students.

September 2007

Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University
Box 1985
Providence, RI 02912
www.annenberginstitute.org

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 HEATHER HARDING: *I wanted to start out talking about how you see this need for going from shallow to deep. Why do we need to have a deeper analysis of culture in education?*

MICA POLLOCK: I think in education – and I mean that really broadly, meaning the kind of conversations we have in education schools or the kind of conversations we have in school hallways or in the *New York Times* or in all kinds of places – we have a tendency to have what I [call] shallow conversations about culture – conversations that try to explain huge things like achievement gaps, racial achievement gaps for example, looking at only one tiny piece of the puzzle. I go like *this* [gesture] because I often try to explain this to my students by using a paper towel roll as if you were looking at education and all of its complexity, looking at the achievement gap and all of its complexity through a paper towel roll, so that you could only see certain parts of the phenomenon and everything *here* [gesture] just got left out of the analysis.

So, for example, we’re trying to explain Latino high school dropout and we say it’s because of Latino families. We look at Latino families through a paper towel roll and we refuse to see the context that Latino families are operating in. We refuse to see the opportunity systems that Latino kids are going to school in. We refuse to see generations of history of the treatment of Latino people in the United States. We actively refuse to see all kinds of puzzle pieces. So, additionally, when we look through that paper towel roll at what we think of as Latino families – and when I say “we,” I’m still talking about the whole field of education having these reductive analyses – often we’re not really seeing Latino families at all, and so we’re imagining Latino family life and the culture of Latino families and simply just throwing it into our talk as an explanation of Latino high school dropout.

And so when I’m talking about a thorough cultural analysis, what I’m really suggesting is that we have more thorough conversations about all of the actors and factors that actually cumulatively add up to something like Latino high school dropout, as opposed to looking through that paper towel roll at what we think of as Latino child rearing, for example.

So we have a lot of conversations about culture and education where we proceed with false information. So, “Latino parents don’t value education” is a false idea that is pumped out all the time in schools of education, school hallways, the *New York Times*.

Mica Pollock is an assistant professor in the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

INTERVIEWER
Heather Harding is a principal associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

We have other false ideas about – I’ll just keep going with this example – about Latino parents not intellectually stimulating their children. We have lots of falsehoods running around. But we also have widespread refusal to see all the other actors and factors that contribute to something like one school’s population of Latino young people leaving before graduation or the nation’s population of Latino kids disproportionately leaving before graduation.

So, thorough conversations about race in education are conversations that ask questions about all the actions that led up to Latino kids disproportionately in the school, in the nation, or even one Latino kid not making it to graduation. I’m interested in the thorough conversations about all the actions that contribute – and that’s what we often fail to do when we have conversations about what we think is “culture.” When we’re talking about “culture in education,” we typically make reductive statements about parenting. That’s one place our conversations often go when we think we’re talking about culture. We often make reductive comments about values; that’s another place that conversations about culture tend to lead.

So, for example, we explain everything through that paper towel roll about “Asian” achievement in education by simply zooming in on what we think of as “Asian values” and refuse to see not only the opportunity systems that Asian immigrants are struggling with when they get here, we refuse to see the treatment of Asian students and how expectations of Asian students by educators play a role in “Asian achievement.” There are many things we refuse to see.

The Underexamined Role of Educators in Achievement Gaps

I’m interested in bringing all the puzzle pieces into the analysis. Because that’s the kind of analysis that I think helps young people in the end. One of the main puzzle pieces that often gets left out of the analysis in education when we start talking about culture is the role of educators. Because often, when we start talking about how culture plays a role in the achievement gap, we end up saying that it’s something about families and their values that directly leads us to an achievement outcome. What we forget is that there are many other actors playing a role in all this, and one that I’m particularly interested in is the educator herself – the teacher or other educators in the school context. How does the principal play a role in an achievement gap? How does the security guard play a role in the achievement gap? There are a lot of different actors we just completely leave out.

When we start talking about culture in education, one of the places I’m interested in focusing my analysis on is the everyday behavior of the educator and how that plays a role – not the only role – but that plays a role in producing achievement outcomes. It seems like an obvious thing to say that the everyday actions of an educator play a role in producing achievement outcomes, but I think a lot of times when we’re having conversations about race in education – especially these days, achievement gaps, racial

achievement patterns – we’re so focused on what is it about this particular race group and its kids that’s creating the achievement gap that we totally forget the role of the educator in creating the achievement gap.

Everyday Anti-Racist Practice for Educators


So, I’ve been working on defining an area of focus that I’m calling *everyday anti-racism* for educators. I’m interested in a different kind of cultural analysis – I’m an anthropologist, so I’m interested in everyday life and everyday acts by kids, parents, but also by educators, by all kinds of people in the system and the impact that those everyday acts have on creating big things like achievement gaps. So to me, thorough cultural analysis, like I said, is analysis that says, What are all the everyday actions that contribute to big [phenomena]? In my case, I’m interested in racial inequalities in education.

I’m interested in focusing analysis on the everyday acts by educators that either distribute or fail to distribute opportunity equally across racial lines in education. I’m interested in everyday acts that educators *do* take that create achievement gaps or everyday acts that educators *could* take that would dismantle achievement gaps that would actually really distribute opportunity equally across racial lines on an everyday basis. So, I’m interested in zooming into the moment-to-moment practice of the educator and saying which moves by educators on a daily basis distribute opportunity equally. And some of the time, we’re talking about literally distributing opportunities like access to gifted [programs]. So what role does the educator have in getting a kid into gifted education or not or tracking a kid – sometimes without warrant – into special education?

Other times, everyday anti-racism has to do with everyday acts that educators take that equally respect young people, particularly young people of color, as being equally worthy of serious academic attention or that equally treat young people, particularly of color, as being equally intellectually capable, academically capable. Or, another piece of what I’m calling everyday anti-racism is about treating people across racial lines as equally complex people. So a lot of what racism is about is looking at people through race lenses and refusing to see their individual complexity, just seeing a group member. Everyday anti-racism is about all of those things.

So, I’ve put together this book *Everyday Anti-Racism*, where I invited – in the end it turned out to be about seventy people who specialize in issues of race and education. I asked each of them to boil down their careers of work on race and education into one recommendation that an educator could take on a daily basis in her classroom to equally distribute opportunities to learn and thrive across racial lines. That book is designed specifically for educators as prompts for ongoing inquiry among educators, particularly classroom teachers, but also school administrators. There’s much to say to the people at the district level too – trying, again, to zoom in on their everyday practice to see its implications for young people.

The Accumulation of Everyday Acts into Structural, Systemic Patterns

 *If you're focused on the everyday acts and a couple of different things that you can do every day or that you should be thinking about every day, how do you then get back to putting those all together for a systemic impact? Or do you?*

Yes. One of the questions I raise when I'm talking to people about the importance of everyday activity is, Who makes structures, actually? We often talk about structures as if someone else makes them – they're just kind of “out there,” they're there before any of us show up.


One of the important ideas I've encountered recently is from someone named Rebecca Blank who talks about *cumulative discrimination*. She points out three kinds of cumulative discrimination. One is over generations, so it actually matters today that generations of African Americans were denied access to literacy or denied adequate school supplies or buildings or facilities – and still are. But that generational accumulation matters. Then there's accumulation of harm across different domains. The Annenberg Institute works on this a lot – that young people need opportunity not just inside school settings, but they also need healthcare and they need housing. So those domains intersect and that intersection creates big systems and structures right there. Then there are a lot of ordinary people in here, too, who play a role in the third arena of cumulative discrimination, which is inside a single domain – for instance, inside education over days, weeks, months, years in a child's life. That's what I'm interested in.

But there are a lot of ordinary people in *all* these arenas of cumulative discrimination. Across generations, there have been ordinary people keeping people out of school buildings or making decisions on school boards about who got facilities and who didn't. All kinds of ordinary people making everyday moves that have impacts for the healthcare and housing of people and in the domain I'm particularly interested in focusing on, the example we started with – Latino dropout. There have been countless, endless ordinary acts by ordinary people that lead to the dropout of any one child and that accumulate to the dropout of many children, and then it creates a structural, systemic pattern like national Latino high school dropout. I'm interested in that accumulation of all these acts, so I don't see big structures and ordinary people as separate domains – to me it's all one system.

Everyday Acts to Move Students Closer to Opportunity

The educator, though, often feels like she's in an overwhelming structure, so she looks at urban education and she feels like her students are denied opportunities in so many ways she can't possibly make a dent in anything. On the one hand, it's important to remember that there are all kinds of policies and actors besides you that could create a situation for

your student. On the other hand, *you* create a situation for your student, too. So I see, in educators young and old and in people who I teach here at the Harvard School of Education, a sense of being so overwhelmed by structures that they imagine no potential for themselves to change those structures. So that's the thing I'm worried about, which is why I'm interested in focusing analysis on something like everyday anti-racism. What are everyday moves people can make to chip away at these big structures that seem overwhelming and impenetrable and seem to determine the futures of young people?

 ***So what were the most compelling moves in your working on this book?***

There are a lot – the book has seventy. A lot of the essays in this book actually are about prompting ongoing inquiry among educators into asking the question over and over every day: Are my everyday acts in my classroom moving kids more toward opportunity, as opposed to further away from opportunity. So one of the things I use in the book and have been using a lot in my teaching is just a number line from algebra, remember? But that simply has on one side – that has toward more opportunity, toward less of opportunity. The ongoing inquiry is: Is the thing I'm doing right now moving my kids more toward opportunity or further away from it – and it sounds, again, simple and not helpful enough if you're looking for a silver bullet, but [for] a lot of the everyday situations the educator in the classroom has multiple potential and solutions – so, for example, we had a discussion in one of my classes this year when I was teaching the new educators and it was all about everybody's everyday practice and what to do with race issues that were popping up.

One of the situations someone had had in their classroom that day – I think it was an African American student who said: "I don't want to work with the Spanish girls," and so the teacher was wondering, in a sense, what was the anti-racist way of dealing with this, and there were different potential solutions. I would say you have to work with them or I'm going to give you a zero and someone else said: "Well, giving somebody a zero is not providing opportunity," so we ruled out giving a zero as a move toward opportunity, but we also [saw] that sometimes opportunity could be provided if people – if young people – were pressed to work together across racial lines, because that's the real world.

Sometimes, if there had been an interpersonal problem between those young people, forcing somebody to work with somebody else was, in fact, denying opportunity. So that was just one example of the complexities of everyday practice that demonstrates that sometimes the most important thing is to keep inquiring as to which moves move you closer to opportunities, as opposed to further away.

Activating High Expectations Every Day

Better examples of moves to take anywhere from the book – one of the interesting realms of inquiry in the book is, What is "high expectations"? How do you activate high expectations on an everyday basis – because low expectations are, of course, foundational to

racism. Racism is, at its origin, about saying that people who get categorized as White are more intelligent, more likely to succeed and more worth it – more worth investing in – than people who are classified as not-White.

That's foundational to what racism is, so when we talk in education about having higher expectations often we're not really – we don't say it often enough, but often what we should be saying is that we're trying to combat or work against racist expectations and that kids of color are not as able as White kids. That's often what we should be saying when we're talking about high expectations. But we often just tell people to have them without saying how exactly on an everyday basis does one activate high expectations. So there are a number of essays in the book that tackle that issue.

For example, Jeff Cohen has done research on *stereotype threat*. His interest is in the need to intervene to deal with the fact that young people of color, who are often stigmatized for imagined low intellectual ability, will be carrying a serious burden of stress and anxiety that they will confirm this stereotype about them. That's what the stereotype threat is. He's very committed to figuring out how to intervene against that. One of his recommendations is, when giving feedback to students of color, who might be under stereotype threat, worrying that if they get a paper marked up with red stuff it suggests or confirms that the teacher thinks that they're intellectually less able, to sandwich critical feedback in between a statement of very high expectations for the young person and a statement of assurance that the educator knows a young person can meet this high expectation. He found, experimentally, that sandwiching serious critical feedback between these two assurances intervenes against stereotypes – it makes the young people receiving that feedback more able to take it in as a useful critique of their work, as opposed to a potential commentary on their abilities.

Everyday Race Consciousness

That's the everyday race situation that an anti-racist teacher needs to deal with – I'm calling this *everyday race consciousness* – that the teacher actually needs to be thinking that on the one hand, the student getting my paper is a complicated individual: this is John, who has *this* particular life situation, who did *this* the night before he wrote *this* paper – he's an individual. I'm not handing this paper back to a group member. I'm handing it back to an individual, John. On the other hand, if John has lived a life in the world where there are people – let's say John is Black – where people have often treated him as if he is less able, then an anti-racist teacher might need to take that into consideration when giving feedback to John.

Anti-racism is about treating John both as an individual and as someone who's living in a racial world. Some teachers have trouble treating John as anything but an individual, because teachers worry that seeing John as a Black student is racist. In some ways, they're

right – refusing to see John as an individual has racism in it, saying that there’s nothing individual about him and the primary thing about him is that he’s Black – refusing to see his individuality – that’s a real problem. On the other hand, an educator who refuses to see the life that John has been living in the world as a young Black man – who refuses to be race conscious in that way – is potentially doing John a real disservice.

That’s a move in the world – that Jeff Cohen move of having in mind the potential for stereotype threat and sandwiching feedback with high expectations and assurances that you know that your student is going to meet those high expectations. So that’s one example. Ron Ferguson also has a piece in a similar vein in the book where he’s talking about the need for *high-perfection, high-help teaching* – that it’s not helpful enough in a world that has its own racialized expectations of kids to just say, I’m going to help you, and it doesn’t matter if we get any right answers – I’m going to help you. That’s not helpful enough.


It’s also not helpful enough to say, You better get the right answers, but I’m not going to help you. He has found, in his own research, that high-help plus high-perfection teaching – we’re really going to be seeking right answers in here, but I’m going to be helping you every step of the way – is most successful in distributing opportunity equally and pedagogically to kids of color. There are so many other suggestions in the book.

Knowing When to Use a Race Lens and When Not To

Some of them are about, How does a teacher know when race is playing a role in her interaction with her students? A lot of times a teacher won’t help her students or situation if she just dumps a race lens on anything, either. There’s a piece in the book by Cathy Shultz talking about, What do you do when students don’t speak – are silent in your room? And she talks about how it wouldn’t necessarily be helpful if you just put a race lens on all your silent students. So the Asian student sitting in your room is silent because she’s Asian. Now I’ve got it – I’m not going to inquire about this any further.

It also wouldn’t necessarily be helpful if you were to refuse a race lens on everything. So, I’m a White teacher and none of the kids of color are speaking in my room, but we’re all individuals – I’m not even going to look into whether our race plays a role in any of this. Rather, she suggests starting an inquiry with students into, Why are you silent? Is there anything going on? Is silence the kind of participation you want to have in my room? But if an inquiry into silence goes into a conversation about race dynamics, allow that race analysis to proceed, but not dumping a race lens on top of the situation ahead of time. Does that make sense?


Anti-racist Practice with White Students

 *Let me ask you just a follow-up question. In your example so far, we've been talking about students of color. Are there any essays in the book that focus on anti-racist practice with White students?*

Yes. I allowed the people in the book to write about what their expertise was on. Most of them were concerned about equal opportunity provision to kids of color, so most of the essays ended up being in that direction, but a lot of the essays also have something to say about the need for either White teachers to engage what it means to be a White teacher or for White students and students of color in the same settings to be inquiring into issues of race and equal opportunity, difference, identity. There aren't as many essays in the book on a scenario that's, in a way, equally important for anti-racist work with just the all-White setting, which is also a racialized setting. But because it's not a setting where the concern is as much about equal opportunity provision, not as many people went there for their essays.

So, I would say the book is heavily weighted toward equal opportunity provision to kids of color.

Looking at the Mix of Races, Not Just One Race

 *In so much that I've been reading and thinking about lately, this racially and ethnically diverse context troubles people. They're not sure what direction to go. So much of what's offered to teachers is about one race group, not the mix of racial groups in a context.*

A lot of the book is zooming in on opportunity provision in a mixed – demographically mixed – situation. There's a piece in the book by Beth Ruben, for example – it's talking about, Do you track classrooms? How do you do group work in a situation where you've had previously racially tracked situations? If you have a situation – in a way it's an anti-racist move to equalize opportunity – do you track your school? On the other hand, then everybody's in the classroom together. You have one group of people who have not only learned to think they're super smart, but have also learned to think, have actually systematically become more skilled – and then you have a group of kids who have been told repeatedly that they're less smart and have been systematically under-skilled. So you can't exactly do a service, particularly to the kids who have been systematically under-skilled, if you just throw everybody into small groups and just assume that because they're racially mixed you're doing something great. Ruben is concerned about this issue of balancing groups and going beyond just saying, As long as I have one Black student in each of these groups, then we have equalized opportunity.

It's actually important to make sure that that group work, for one thing, is scaffolded so that the kids who have been systematically under-skilled actually receive the skills that

they've been denied. She comments on groups that she's seen where the kids of color from the previously low-track situations are always given the role of artist. I mean, they're participating, but the White kids from the previously high-track situation are the ones who are doing – getting even more research skills, certain kinds of writing skills. So she wants the educator's attention to really be on, Am I providing the skill that people have been denied?

I think that's a nice example of the need for educators to think in real detail about what opportunity provision actually requires, because you could stop short and say, Now that I have everyone in the same room, things have been equalized. So I think I'm equally interested in zooming in on moment-to-moment opportunity provision, and I think that's why educators are so important in all of this. And there's something I'm also finding in working with educators on this material: there's something very empowering about how thinking that one's moment-to-moment action can actually play a role in reversing some dynamics that seem overwhelming at first.