



***Straight Talk: Growing as Multicultural Educators,
2nd ed.***

Author:	Rebecca Powell (2007)		
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In a perfect world, no student in any classroom would feel invisible. Hoping to generate educational reform one classroom at a time, Rebecca Powell challenges teachers to examine how their own background and life experience has shaped who they are and influenced their definition of what normal is. Her premise is that only when teachers can "see" the operating principles behind the ways in which the dominant culture maintains its centrality will they be able to truly see the students sitting in front of them (Powell, 1999).

Encouraging educators to reflect on culture and rethink their approaches to teaching is a fairly common theme, but Powell contributes her unique voice to the field in *Straight Talk*. She realizes that many of her readers may limit the scope of racism to individual bigotry rather than recognizing the enduring, pervasive impacts of historical racism on society's structure. She has written this book as a series of letters to readers, her target audience being Euro-American, middle-class teachers whose previous experience of diversity has been similar to her own, that is, somewhat narrow. Powell describes growing up in a Cleveland suburb and venturing into the city as a young woman for "helping" projects. She writes about her "heart being in the right place" in her attempts to help, but also about how she has moved past the initial stage of awareness to a deeper understanding of "the need to confront the social norms and political decisions that reinforce a system of white privilege" (p. 5).

Teachers who could be advocates for their students are the ones Powell hopes will read her book. In her introductory letter to these readers, Powell encourages them to remain open and thoughtful as they read through subsequent letters covering specific biases, such as racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. Her

view of cultural racism, defined as the assumption that the prevailing white culture's language and traditions are the reference point for positioning those of other cultures as "different" from their own, maintains that it is harder to identify than individual racism or bigotry, and that it is everywhere. To explain the concept of privilege to the privileged the author borrows from Peggy MacIntosh (1988) the idea of the "invisible knapsack" of racial privilege as a list of assets. Each chapter contains the author's reflections on her own passage from a paternalistic model to one of advocacy for systemic change, illustrated through stories from her own teaching experience in public school and university classrooms

The author effectively draws attention to subtle attitudes and behavior patterns that reinforce the dominant culture and suppress others. She points out that when students' cultures are unsupported in the academic setting, it is no wonder that many of them choose to form community connections outside of school and reject the academic success model the dominant culture provides. In addition to describing specific biases as they exist in the public school setting, Powell tackles the tough topic of school failure attributable to low teacher expectations and culturally incompatible curriculums that marginalize some students. She explains that providing equal opportunity is simply not enough. Instead, for an educational setting to be equitable, needy students must be provided assistance above and beyond what mainstream students normally receive. For example, according to Powell her home state Kentucky has equalized funding across school districts and now provides advanced coursework to rural districts through technology. Still, she re-asserts that many students actually need more than just "equal opportunity" to achieve academic success.

Schools in Kentucky provide the context for many of the stories in this book, as this state is where Powell has worked as a teacher and college professor, and presently as dean of the graduate education programs at Georgetown College there. One narrative provides a detailed account of a fifth grade project about strip mining on Black Mountain that may have contributed to the Kentucky Assembly's vote to buy part of the mountain to preserve it. The author uses this project to demonstrate a democratic, problem-based, community-situated approach to learning. Students who participate in this type of education, she explains, experience the power of their own literacy to produce change.

As an educational reform tool *Straight Talk* definitely fills a niche. It is different from many books and articles written for educators on the topic of cultural competence since its author speaks, unapologetically, as a member of mainstream American culture to other members of the same. It has been published as part of the series *Counterpoints: Studies in the Postmodern Theory of Education*, the purpose of which is to make current educational theory and philosophy accessible to those outside a university setting. Although the tone is casual rather than scholarly, the book has the potential through the extensive footnotes following each chapter to educate non-academic readers on major contributions to the field of societal equity and bias. The current edition, however, might have benefited from a literature review and statistical update in order to locate it firmly within current theory and demographic trends. For example, data reported in the chapter on assessment describing the growth in numbers of limited English proficient students in U.S. schools came from the

ten-year span 1984-1994.

All things considered, *Straight Talk* makes a powerful contribution to education reform by providing a disarming entry point into territory that may be quite challenging for some practitioners. One of Powell's arguments for equity is the idea that the dominant culture loses opportunity for richness and maturity when it remains egocentric and judgmental. Powell generously opens her own learning process up to her colleagues for perusal, thereby encouraging her readers to engage deeply with their own set of cultural assumptions. She purposefully avoids giving a pat definition of multicultural education, yet teachers will finish the book with a much clearer sense of what equity looks like in an educational setting.

It is clear that Powell intends this book to serve teachers as catalyst for conversations on and analysis of equity reform in specific school settings. In the final chapter, Powell includes an equity checklist for teachers who want to analyze their own classrooms. Potential learning contexts in which *Straight Talk* might be used include study groups for in-service teachers, pre-service teacher coursework, and professional development on equity.

References

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Jennifer J. Daniels
Migrant Education Program, West Central Region
Grand Junction, Colorado
<jen.daniels@earthlink.net>

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