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Facing History and Ourselves: Portrait of a Classroom

Teachers of Facing History and Ourselves in schools with immigrant populations have a unique opportunity for multicultural practice. Adolescents grappling with issues of belonging and not belonging have much to gain from listening to the “outsiders” in their midst.

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At 8:45, the students in Katie Green's class spill into the room. I make some quick calculations: 19 students, 10 boys, 9 girls; 9 whites, 8 blacks, 2 Hispanics; Addidas has it all over Nikes and Reeboks. Though all are 7th and 8th graders, the girls look several years older than the boys.

Bobby walks in as noisily as possible, a prelude to the incessant, though insightful, commentary he will carry on throughout the class. Daphne seems only grudgingly present, squeezed into jeans that taper at the ankles. Eddie sports a mohawk, earring, and unlaced sneakers. Louise wears a ponytail, a pink sweater, and braces. David's jean jacket is torn and open, displaying a faded heavy-metal T-shirt. Jacques and Sylvio, in jeans

and half-tucked-in button-downs, walk in together, quietly talking.

I am here to observe a semester-long social studies unit, Facing History and Ourselves. For five months, I will regularly observe classes taught at the Harriet Tubman School, a public K-8 school in the Boston area that serves the needs of a multicultural (and increasingly immigrant) student body.¹

An interdisciplinary civic education program that began in 1976 and now reaches nearly half a million students each year, Facing History and Ourselves seeks to teach history in a way that helps adolescents reflect critically upon contemporary social issues. The program focuses on a specific period—the Nazi rise to power and the Holocaust—and, through so doing, guides students back and forth between a historical case study and reflection on the causes and consequences of present-day prejudice, intolerance, violence, and racism. As the resource text explains:

The curriculum must help students whose newly discovered notions of subjectivity raise the problem of differing perspectives, competing truths, the need to understand motives and to consider the intentions and abilities of themselves and others.... Methodology has been developed to encourage students to understand more than one perspective in a dilemma, to place themselves in the position of another person, and to be willing to express ideas in class without fear of ridicule.²

Questions raised by Facing History's historical case study are highly relevant to this school's culturally diverse student body: What does it mean to belong to a group, or, conversely, to be different? How does a community handle diversity among its members? Through what mechanisms have societies forced individuals

to conform? What responsibility do individual citizens have for protecting the rights of those different from themselves? Observing in this classroom and speaking with these students has made me aware of both the enormous potential of this curriculum and the complex ways in which students respond to it. The portrait that follows attempts to convey a sense of this complexity.

The Bilinguals, the Monolinguals

Jacques is slight for a 12-year-old, and delicate. His head is small, but his face is big, particularly when he smiles. Narrow wrists and long hands jut out beyond too-short shirt cuffs, slightly frayed. The only "stylish" item is a black digital wrist watch: "It's new," he tells me, as I watch him take it off and put it on again and again.

Jacques is attentive in class, but his shyness betrays him. He enthusiastically waves his hand to answer questions, but usually when his teacher's back is turned. When he came to the United States from Haiti three years ago, he spoke no English. He lives here with his mother and five siblings in a one-bedroom apartment. Jacques is proud of his background and complains that his American-born classmates "treat us like we're bums from out of town."

Jacques is one of a growing number of "bums from out of town" at the Harriet Tubman School. The school houses 364 children in grades K-8, 84 of whom are Haitian refugees. Like Jacques, many have had little or no former schooling. Typically, their first few years are spent in a separate, Creole-speaking bilingual program occupying 5 of the school's 19 classrooms. By state law, students in the program must be mainstreamed after three years. Through perseverance and

remarkably hard work, many "bilinguals" have achieved a 3rd or 4th grade reading level by this time; they are then placed in classes alongside "monolinguals," who, though similar in age, may be years ahead in schooling.

The demographics at Tubman are constantly changing. Two years ago, Haitian students made up roughly 8-10 percent of the student body; now they represent 25-28 percent, and, since Tubman is the only school in the city with a bilingual program for Haitian students, this percentage will certainly increase.

Serving the educational needs of wholly different cultures is difficult, but creating an environment supportive of difference is still more complex. Every two weeks, the school holds "community meetings" (conducted in both English and Creole) in which tensions, conflicts, and issues of discrimination are raised. The school also trains 8 to 12 students each year to mediate conflicts within the school community; mediation teams are composed of both Haitian and American students, or "bilingual" and "monolingual" students, as everyone calls them here. An elective in Creole is now offered for monolingual students, and daily morning announcements are broadcast in both Creole and English. As school principal David Vellucci explains:

The goal is to build a sense of community, a sense that people have to work together because that's the only way people can have any kind of existence. It's a lofty kind of goal with young people because their experiences and their maturation don't quite hook up with that goal.

The Salami Tactic

It is the fourth week of the course.

Stretching across two walls of the room are black-and-white photographs of scenes from Nazi Germany. One poster depicts row after row of Nazi schoolchildren marching in unison, arms raised in a "Heil Hitler" salute. All week long, students have been discussing what factors facilitated Hitler's rise to power. Today's lesson directs their attention toward the "ordinary citizens" who allowed it to happen. Teacher Katie Green stands patiently in the front of the room; her notes, a kitchen knife, and a foot-long salami rest on the counter behind her.

She begins: "It's 1933 and Hitler has just passed his first law restricting Jewish activities: all civil servants must be Aryans. Would people protest in the streets? What do you think?" A few students shrug their shoulders. Bobby yells out boldly, "Naw, most people wouldn't care about that so much anyway." Katie picks up the salami and begins slowly slicing off a piece. Surprised, students look at each other and begin to laugh. Several shout out that they would like a piece.

Handing the first slice to Bobby, Katie continues: "Second law: Jews can't work in public places and the media, like in radio, movies, schools, or theaters. Were people screaming, 'Hey! this should be stopped!'" A few students shake their heads no; others have their eyes fixed on Bobby's ostentatious chewing. Louise ventures, "Well, I mean, Jews could get other jobs, after all." "Other jobs, right!" Katie agrees.

She cuts off a second slice. Students shuffle their chairs in anticipation; some shout out "Me! Me!" Bobby chimes in, "I'm still hungry!" Ignoring them all, Katie heads toward the back of the room. Louise straightens up in her chair to receive her piece.

"Third law: a boycott on all Jewish

businesses. What's a boycott?" David answers: "It's like the civil rights on the bus." Katie begins to cut a third piece. By now all hands are waving. "I'm hungry, too," Katie says, and bites into the piece herself to a chorus of disappointed "awwws."

The "salami tactic" signifies how Hitler came to power. Bit by bit, in stages that people could have opposed at any step, a whole world was destroyed.

"Would you have fought back if you were a Jew?" Katie asks. Unhesitatingly, Jacques answers, "Yes, with other Jews I would have, because it wouldn't be fair." "I would want to," Maria explains, "but it depends. What are they going to do to you?" David concurs: "Yeah, you'd think you would, but it would be really hard." Jacques appears unfazed. He protests: "I know I would fight back. If I wanted to do something they wouldn't let me do, I'd fight back." Though several students look doubtful, Katie answers sincerely, "Well, I congratulate you. That's very brave. Unfortunately, not everyone feels that way."

Jacques does seem to feel differently from his American-born peers, and he appears to make sense of this course a bit differently, too. The themes of belonging, exclusion, and handling peer pressure surface in the daily dramas of most 7th and 8th graders, but for Jacques they resonate with the stories of the Haitian people and his own identification as a refugee.

When I asked American-born students what stood out for them most about the Facing History course, most mentioned the horror of Nazi brutality. When I asked Jacques this question, he spoke of the inaction of those who stood by:

It's impossible to believe that people are getting put in jail, beaten up, killed, shot, and everything, and

they said they didn't notice. And the people who killed them deny it. I mean, that's impossible to believe!

Though Jacques acknowledged—with some prodding on my part—that "not everybody in Germany" regarded the Jews as "their own people," he in fact saw them as of "the same blood . . . born in the same country . . . created by the same person, God." How could these people be abandoned "just because of their different religions"?

Apparently, Jacques' inability to fathom German passivity stems from his pride in his own people's resistance:

People really joined together to get rid of Duvalier Even though they were different from each other, they helped each other when there's danger. I thought that was right. And my people did it, and I felt proud. Well, that didn't happen in Nazi Germany.

Though this model of responsible action may hinder Jacques' understanding of German bystanders, it underscores his belief that he would have "fought back" and fortifies his resolve to fight discrimination in his own life. In this respect, Jacques is not unique. School principal David Vellucci comments:

Unlike the kids from Haiti, the American kids haven't had this sort of larger political context that takes them out of themselves, to another level. We should be able to somehow incorporate that raised consciousness on the part of our bilingual kids to help the monolingual kids understand their moral responsibilities.

Relating History to the Present

Everyone is excited—we're going to watch TV. I am amused by the sudden

feeling of classroom community. It's not *The Wonder Years* but that doesn't matter: as long as it's TV, all eyes are riveted.

Frank, a German Jew in his 50s, is recalling an experience he had in his elementary school. One in a series of videotaped survivor testimonies used during the Facing History program, Frank's story bears witness to the experience of degradation and ridicule. He remembers having been forced to stand in front of his classmates while his teacher—a member of the Nazi party—pointed out his “semitic features” to his peers. Frank's story causes some uncomfortable laughter.

When the tape is over, students record their impressions in their journals. Eventually Katie asks, “Why were these kids getting picked on?” Bobby yells out, “Because they were Jews, and Hitler taught the Germans to hate the Jews.” Several students nod; a few others raise their hands. Bobby continues, “But you know, everybody picks on some people. It's not a nationality thing.” Katie asks the class to consider why this is so. “They feel like they get power to do it,” Maria replies. “Were the German people bad?” Katie asks. “Not the German people,” explains David, the one Jewish student in the class. “That's the way they had to act. If you don't, you'll get picked on.” “It's not that they're bad; it's that they were brought up that way. It's society training them,” confirms Bobby.

Skillfully, Katie has opened today's discussion by asking students to reflect on the concrete experiences of particular individuals, and has then widened her scope to address broader questions of human behavior. Now she moves back into ground students' observations in their own experience. She asks: “Do people besides the Germans do this, too? What about in our

“I want you to be really honest and write about something you've seen in this school where students were discriminated against. Don't use people's names.”

community? Have you seen behavior like this?”

Everyone answers at once. “Whites versus blacks.” “White punks versus Jews and blacks.” “Blacks versus whites.” Andrew says a little tentatively, “Americans versus Haitians.”

“All right,” Katie continues, “this course is about ‘facing history,’ but it's also about ‘ourselves.’ I want us really to face ourselves now. Lots of people think the Germans are really bad, but I think this goes on here, too.” Handing out a blank index card to each student, she explains, “I want you to be *really* honest and write about something you've seen in *this school* where students were discriminated against. Don't use people's names.”

Students immediately put pen to paper: their stories appear to be close to the surface, waiting to be told. While several shrink from reading out loud, others are eager:

I see people making fun of the bilingual students because they're different and often because they will say something to you and laugh or point at people, and people don't know what they're saying. Also because they dress different. People make fun of their clothes and hair.

I saw two people chasing a Haitian boy down the hall and into the boys'

bathroom. I went in, and I knew the two boys that were bothering the Haitian. I laughed and said leave the poor boy alone.

In school I see Haitians being picked on for no reason. Is it because they're stupid, they're Haitian, or what?

Dividing the class into several clusters, Katie asks each group to devise a skit based on these ideas. In line with earlier discussions about the roles of “victims,” “victimizers,” and “bystanders” in Nazi Germany, she stipulates that each skit must contain characters portraying one of these roles. The room gets noisy very fast.

One group selects an incident chosen by Sylvio, a Haitian student. It concerns a conflict between an American and a Haitian player on the basketball court. When the Haitian player accidentally drops the basketball several minutes into the game, his frustrated American teammate lashes back with racial and ethnic slurs. The Haitian student responds by pushing the American; a fight ensues. The principal arrives on the scene. Then, because the Haitian speaks no English and cannot defend himself, he asks a bilingual friend to accompany him to the principal's office.

Two Haitians, one African-American, and two whites perform this drama. Nancy, a Haitian, refuses to have a speaking part. She is given the role of the non-English speaking Haitian student. This works out well because Sylvio has adamantly refused playing *any* Haitian role. After a good deal of coaxing, he grudgingly consents to play the *bilingual* Haitian student, but *only* if he does not have to speak Creole before the class, and only if it is clear to everyone that *his* character (unlike Nancy's) also speaks English.

The skit goes well, but I feel uneasy. I am struck by Sylvio's need to distance himself from playing a Haitian role, and wonder whether this direct attention to the problem ameliorates or exacerbates the pain of discrimination.

A second skit also concerns Haitian-American relations. In it, two students are cast as white Americans, as two Haitians, and one (whose nationality and race is unspecified) as a mediator. The "Americans" whisper to each other, point at the Haitians, and laugh. Snatches of their conversation can be overheard: "smell bad," "nappy hair," "dumb Haitians."

The "Haitians" also whisper and point, but their words are unintelligible. The mediator encourages each group to talk to the other. Suddenly (and quite out of nowhere), the American group walks up to the Haitian group and asks if they would like "to be friends." Triumphantly, the mediator declares "The end!" All five students giggle and shove each other off the make-shift stage.

Furtively I glance at Sylvio. He is laughing, but also shifting back and forth uncomfortably. Jacques is looking down at the table.

"Was this skit realistic?" Katie asks. "Not the ending," Sylvio says. "American kids wouldn't just go up and be friends like that." But the name-calling was realistic, Maria and Gary attest, and Sylvio agrees: "Yes, it was like that for me. They were like that until I learned English." Katie asks who Sylvio means by "they." Sylvio: "The American kids." Turning to Louise, the white girl who has played an American in the skit, Katie asks, "And who is the 'they' for you?" Louise answers: "The Haitian students," and underscores Sylvio's point by adding, "We didn't know how to end it, because it's still going on. It's not like it *can't* end; it just *hasn't*."

Observing these skits in class, I had thought them dicey but productive. I am therefore struck days later when, in our second interview, Jacques proclaims that the skits were "stupid" and that he "should have said something" about them. Jacques explains:

We don't play basketball, and we don't go out and push people around. We all play soccer—it's like a tradition. They were supposed to play a part, but they didn't do it *right*. They put their *own* stuff on it; they did what they *thought* of us, so they weren't doing really what *was*, they were doing what they *thought*.

Watching his classmates "put their own stuff" on the Haitian people seems to underscore Jacques' awareness of feeling different, unknown, and discriminated against in his school. "I said to myself when I was there, I said, listen, of all the kids in the world, why did you pick on *us*?"

Jacques' response to these skits—and, more generally, to the course itself—is complex. On the one hand, he acknowledges that he learned "one very important thing" from the program. He explains:

Before taking the class I thought, if someone helps me, I'll help him, but if he doesn't help me, forget about him. Now I think it is always important to help someone in trouble. Cause if you don't, you'll be the same as he or she is, and then you're both *wrong*.

This lesson is important to Jacques, but he is not sure his classmates have learned the same thing. In reference to the "distortions" he found in the basketball skit (a skit that was, ironically, designed by a fellow Haitian student), Jacques notes that many of his classmates still pick on bilingual students and that others do nothing to stop them. "I think they're aware of

it," he laments, but "they just don't care." Arguing that Facing History's historical case study did little to alter students' attitudes toward Haitian refugees, Jacques explains:

Kids were studying about another country, but not about *us*. If they were, they might have had a change of thoughts. But they were having a change of thoughts for the Jews and Germans. I wouldn't say that what they thought of some history could change their minds about what they thought about *us*.

But at other points, Jacques contradicts his own skeptical observations. An essay he writes at the course's conclusion explains that the program's value lies in its contemporary resonance. He writes:

A kid might come from another country to this country. The kids in this country don't respect them because they're different from them. The course shows the kids movies of Jewish people in concentration camps. The kids learn that they did that to Jews because they were different. The kids learn that they shouldn't make fun of other different kids because they're different; if they do they'll think that they're as cruel and mean as the Nazis were to the Jews. Because they've learned that it is cruel to bother someone because they are different.

Real Solutions Don't Come Easily

Bit by bit, I began to glimpse the complexity of this course and the delicacy required for teaching these issues. The intention of the Facing History curriculum is to help all students reflect critically on their own beliefs, behavior, and responsibilities toward one another. Katie Green persevered in stressing this point as skillfully as anyone I can imagine. After the skits, she asked students to suggest solutions



As students at Graham and Parks Alternative School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, discuss the Holocaust in their *Facing History and Ourselves* class, they try to relate the issues to their lives in the present.

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to the problems they'd raised. As in Louise's case, however, most students found reaching "real solutions" to be impossible; their answers were hopelessly contrived.

The Haitian students I observed seemed more politically aware than their American-born classmates—more conscious of the political conditions that have helped shape their nation, their identity, and their lives. American-born adolescents wrestling with issues of belonging and not belonging, joining and not joining, and acting and not acting, have something to gain from listening to these "outsiders" in their midst, while teachers of *Facing History* in areas with refugee/immigrant populations have a unique opportunity for multicultural practice. This case also suggests that educators stand to gain by using historical subject matter to address contemporary conflicts.

But changes in consciousness do not come easily. Connections students draw between the historical subject matter and their everyday lives seem profound at one moment and tenuous at the next; positions they occupy along the continuum from "belonging" to "standing out" elicit different understandings of this particular course; cognitive understandings do not necessarily translate into changes in behavior; changes in behavior today are not necessarily sustained beyond tomorrow. I found these limitations

disappointing at first. I came to this class hoping for radical transformations—at least in a student or two—and I soon found that transformations occur slowly, unevenly, and beyond the confines of a semester-long curriculum. More aware of the complexities inherent in this endeavor, I now see these limitations as inevitable. They do not undermine the value of the course, but they do underscore Katie Green's observation that *Facing History and Ourselves* "isn't the answer," but simply "a wonderful beginning, or a wonderful middle," which is necessarily contingent upon "changes in everything around it."

My Last Day

I stop one more time to examine the mural in the school's entryway. Painted in vibrant purples, blues, oranges, yellows, and greens, the mural commemorates Rosa Parks' visit to the school in 1985. Like *Facing History and Ourselves*, it juxtaposes famous historical events alongside everyday scenes of students learning. I lean against the wall, making notes about the mural in my fieldbook. Two girls—each around 10 or 11—notice me writing, and they stop to look themselves. One begins pointing out students she recognizes.

I ask: "Are those kids from this school?" "Yes," she answers, "That's Andrew, that's Keisha, and that's

Emilio. I don't know the other ones. That's Rosa Parks the day she came to our school, talking to those kids. And that's Rosa Parks on the bus. And that"—she gestures to another section of the wall—"is the march on Washington." On the lower righthand corner of the wall, I've noticed several scenes of schooling from around the world. I point to that section and ask her to explain it to me. "That's all different countries," she says, nodding at a scene in which a chalkboard proclaims, "Educacion es Liberacion." Pointing to another scene in which an "Ecole" sign is nailed to the door of a small wooden schoolhouse, she continues, "That's Haiti, 'cause that's how they spell school in Haiti."

Running along the top of the mural are a chain of clasped hands—brown, black, yellow, and white. The girl looks at the wall, then at me, and then back at the wall. She smiles, shrugs her shoulders, and then says, "It's nice!" I agree and ask her to tell me what she thinks is nice about it. After considering for a moment, she explains, "All the different countries together. That's what those hands mean across the top."

I leave the school with Louise's words echoing in my ears: "It's not like it *can't* change, it just *hasn't*." □

This article is based on data collected from September 1989-January 1990. The names of the school and all students, teachers, and administrators mentioned in this article have been changed.

In Margot Strom and William Parsons, *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior* (Watertown: Intentional Educations Inc.), 1982, p. 14.

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