NYU Metro Center Affirms Anti-Bias Education

NEW YORK — Biases continue to outline the contours of American schooling, targeting intersectional identities while lingering in school policies and practices and hardening in the minds and imaginations of many educators. In spite of this, there is a rapidly spreading sentiment that training against bias is flawed, that a system that produces and maintains static racial disparities is not broken; instead non-white people are. We, at NYU Metro Center, reject this premise outright.

When institutions such as schools, that wield powerful influence over the lives of children, are not anti-biased, they are unequivocally dangerous. Thus, we recognize the need for educators to (1) become aware of the manifestations of racism and privilege in our own lives, in the systems we create and support, and in our cultures, (2) work together in community to dismantle and reorganize the systems that support racism and privilege, (3) actively support each other and our families to acknowledge, honor, and appreciate differences, and (4) incorporate anti-bias education at every level of American education.

Working to undo bias is fundamental to imagining a just society; there is clear evidence that a string of biases are manifestations of a complex system of interlocking oppressions such as patriarchy, xenophobia, homophobia, capitalism, ableism, transphobia, and white supremacy. These systems of influence overdetermine almost everything in education: who gets to learn, on what terms, who gets to teach, what language gets valued, who gets to succeed, who gets to stay in school, who gets to see themselves in curriculum and teaching, and so on. There is equally clear evidence that the maintenance of racial oppression, specifically, has heavily influenced U.S. schooling, shaping schools and classrooms as not only indifferent to indigenous, Black, Brown, and Asian bodies but most often hostile to them. This is why we believe that no adult should be working in our schools without a deep consciousness of their identities and their biases, and how these impact their work with students, particularly poor, gender fluid, queer, dis/abled, immigrant, non-English dominant, and non-white students.

NYU Metro Center seeks to disrupt the hierarchy of humanness that is embedded in these interlocking systems of oppression as well as other ideologies that are premised on such a hierarchy. The ideology of white supremacy, of course, is in bed with those of capitalism, patriarchy, and other hate ideologies, and the intersectional nature of such ideologies rears its ugly head every day in our schools. Thus, anti-bias work seeks to transform a system predisposed to partiality rather than target specific individuals or groups of people. It entails understanding the importance of social and cultural influences on student outcomes and experiences within schools. And given that persistent disparities in education over-determine school outcomes, the truth is: We need more anti-bias work in education and not less.

1 The Exclusion Laws in the late 1800’s continue today when Asians are not included when issues of race and bias are raised. Not mentioning or ignoring them continues to exclude them. This explicit exclusion gives rise to the implicit notion that Asians are aligned with “White Supremacy.” History books barely give mention of the accomplishments and sufferings of Asian in America. It should also be noted that this year marks the 150 anniversary of the building of the Transcontinental Railroad of which the entire half from the west through the Rocky Mountains were done by Chinese immigrants. Further, one of the largest single massacres in the United States was of the lynching of 17 Chinese in Los Angeles.
Anti-bias education is about so much more than one-off trainings, although there is some evidence that even these can be beneficial. Anti-bias education promotes learning about each other’s differences, invites children to be proud of themselves and their families, teaches students to respect and honor difference, recognize bias, and speak up for what is right. It is shaped by a deep-seated belief in the importance of justice, the dream of liberation, the promise that each student can be positioned to achieve all she, he, or they is capable of, and the knowledge that, together, human beings can make a difference. Anti-bias education not only addresses race and ethnicity but also includes gender identity, language, religious diversity, sexual orientation, physical and mental abilities, and economic class. It promotes an active, problem-solving approach that is integrated into all aspects of a school’s environment, from curriculum to climate. Finally, it promotes an understanding of social problems and invites educators to invent strategies for improving social conditions within our schools/schooling.

It is hard work to confront and eliminate barriers of prejudice, misinformation, and bias about specific aspects of personal and social identity. But we see this work as necessary in order to inspire learning and advance educational equity. Thus, it is a good thing that school systems across the country including districts in New York, Michigan, Massachusetts, Ohio, and California, among many others, have chosen to develop their systems in line with the hope found in equity, which speak to the ways that we care about, grow, and affirm each other as part of the broad spectrum of humanity. The work is necessary for people, living in a diverse world, who desire to honor the dignity and humanity of others while also imagining a world absent of social hierarchies. In short, it is necessary for all people.

We understand that we need to neither be constant victims of social subordination nor teach our most innate human attributes such as connection and kindness. According to Way, Ali, Gilligan, and Noguera, connection and kindness are natural capacities that our culture starves out of us. We are born human and enter cultures that distort our human nature. We begin to hate and make some people more human than others. This is all a distortion, and to correct this distortion, we need to nurture our needs and capacities to connect, listen, and join others in the struggle to disrupt the power structures that dehumanize, subjugate, marginalize, and oppress. To do so, biases must be broken, and a new world must be imagined.

According to Harvard’s Making Caring Common Project, things such as kindness can be nurtured, and according to researchers at NYU Metro Center thick listening, understanding, and human connection can be reclaimed. There is also a growing body of evidence to suggest building human capacity by elevating cultural consciousness influences institutional outcomes, interrupting social disparities from who gets to be born to who will die prematurely after birth. There is further evidence that building cultural capacity saves lives and advances opportunity. Thus, anti-bias education shows promise as a strategy for improving the knowledge, attitudes, and skills across the social spectrum—from health settings, where there is evidence of a positive relationship between anti-bias training and improved patient outcomes, to education, where there is evidence that anti-bias education is linked to the decline of racial disparities in exclusionary discipline, academic achievement, academic placement, attendance, graduation rates, special education identification, college access, and persistence.

Because of its multidimensional promise, we embrace anti-bias work until every bias against our children is broken, until every door to opportunity is open for them. And we shall embrace this work as long as some children are funded 58 cents to their more advantaged peers’ dollar, as long as teachers make pedestals of students’ backs, as long as the crushing weight of history holds back some students and propels others forward simply on the basis of geography, gender identity, sexual orientation, faith, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, housing status, linguistic heritage, ability label, last name, and so on. We shall embrace anti-bias work as long as any of our children are evicted from school at rates disproportionate to others and despised in school when they are not being forced out.
Very recently, leaders of color including the Chancellor of New York City’s Department of Education have come under attack for their unwavering commitment to anti-bias education. We stand as proud partners with these leaders and reject all attempts to undermine, sabotage, and resist educational justice work. We also commend our partners from around the U.S. for taking bold steps to confront injustice through education much like German schools have post-World War II, and like the New York State Department of Education has moved toward with its recent adoption of its Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework. These efforts, particularly across large systems, have never been more profoundly important. Thus, we stand with all who are doing their best to right the wrongs of history even in the face of resistance. We commend them for their courage and honor them for their love and commitment to our children.