

## Teaching Pride, Dispelling Shame

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First published in the June 17, 2005 of the Seattle Gay News

Why should "pride" be a part of every school's curriculum? Why Gay pride? Why Black pride? Why pride as a woman? As a child with epilepsy? As a Sikh person? Why is it even the business of the schools? Isn't their job the teaching of reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic? Isn't that why we test for those things?

I recently watched the landmark documentary *Eye of the Storm*, produced by ABC News. It was the first video to document Jane Elliott's courageous undertaking to help her third grade class understand the meaning of prejudice. In it, Ms. Elliot talks to the camera about how, on the day after the assassination of Martin Luther King, she felt compelled to provide her all-white Midwest class something more than platitudes. They needed an experience that would move them to appreciate where racism comes from and what its devastating consequences can be on all parties.

The video shows her implementing that lesson plan three years later, with yet another group of third graders, in which she divides them by eye color and uses examples of the blue-eyed children's bad behavior to generate derogatory stereotypes about blue-eyed people. You watch the blue-eyed children shrink before your very eyes. You watch the brown-eyed children, over the course one school day, turn into bullies who are willing to mistreat their former best friends. On day two, Ms. Elliot announces that she was mistaken and that it is actually brown-eyed people who are less capable and honorable. Again, she uses real examples to support her thesis and the children believe her. All of them. Again, everybody's behavior changes, with the targeted people doing less well on reading tests and the privileged ones behaving meanly. Elliot talks, at the end of the film, about how test scores dropped or rose on cue and then, when the lesson was over, became high for the rest of the year.

Why? Because the curriculum was meaningful. Because the message was clear that prejudice damages everyone. And that things as superficial as eye color have no bearing on your worth as a human being, your intelligence, your compassion. And because children were trusted with a kernel of truth: the messages you tell yourself, and that others tell you about yourself, are more powerful than most of us realize. So tell yourself messages that will help you to become the best you can be.

How many schools address race prejudice and racism head on today? Precious few. And precious few address sexism, heterosexism, xenophobia, or anti-Semitism and other religious bigotry and oppression. A few do address ableism, without giving children that language, but at least helping people notice stereotypes they may have about people with disabilities. And as the grandmother of one child with developmental disabilities and another with cerebral palsy, I appreciate that. But it is such a meager start.

Pride is the polar opposite of shame. When we don't teach pride then, by omission, we "teach" shame. We don't have a choice but to teach one or the other. Children's and teens' worlds are filled with racially-skewed news coverage, gratuitous anti-Gay slurs on sitcoms and commercials, music and films that demean women, and politicians who tolerate the profiling of people of color and of Muslims and people of Middle Eastern descent. If we don't help students recognize those influences for what they are, if we don't offer other images to counterbalance those, then we are complicit. Complicit in the shame that targeted young people feel and in the bullying behavior of those who target them. And complicit in the lower test scores that result.

Schools do address bullying. But many teach only the "safe" things in those curricula. Things like assertive responses to bullies and how to report harassment to an adult. How many address the prejudices that often underlie children's choices of slurs? Not many. How many teach what it means to be an ally or that one way to maintain your dignity is to call oppression "oppression"?

And how many educators infuse into the environment and the conversation the recognition of historical figures' religious beliefs, hidden disabilities, ethnic backgrounds, gender expressions and sexual orientations?

The Safe Schools Coalition offers them resources so that they can, through training, a list serve, publications and a web site.

I believe that more educators are teaching pride today than when we began offering resources, seventeen years ago. And I know that we have a long way to go until every young person is helped at school to feel pride in his or her culture and to understand and resist prejudice and oppression.