

Book Review

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Larson, C. and Ovando, C. (2001). *Confronting Biases: The Color of Bureaucracy*.

The Color of Bureaucracy is not a lengthy read, but it does require some time to digest. You will find yourself thinking about its powerful message long after finishing the book and likely will keep picking it up to reread various passages.

Colleen Larson and Carlos Ovando have done a great service by placing into historical context why discrimination based on race, class, ethnicity, language, gender, and other characteristics still persists in many forms in our nation. Their challenges to the assumptions and societal patterns that many educators have long taken for granted must not go unheeded. The authors debunk the myth that there is equity in multicultural school communities by highlighting ways our school bureaucracies systematically disadvantage children of color and those from lower social classes. They provide a much-needed wake-up call regarding the disparities across schools that have been reinforced, not reduced, over time. Indeed, a major strength of this book is that it assists those viewing the world from a majoritarian perspective, even those who feel that they have overcome their own prejudices, to realize just how entrenched such biases are and how they continue to affect our schools and communities. Upon completing the book, one realizes that the authors are right in asserting that “racial and ethnic issues in this country are always about all of us; and if we live in all-White communities and send our children to all-White schools, issues of race are particularly about us” (p. 160).

The authors’ in-depth description of the historical treatment of minority populations in the United States provides the context for a detailed case study of racial tensions and misunderstandings in a midwestern school community, fictitiously named Jefferson Heights. This rich case study is clearly a distinctive feature of the book. The authors outline how the incidents involving students

engage the remainder of the Jefferson Heights community and are viewed quite differently by the White and African-American segments of the population. By returning to this case throughout the remainder of the book, the reader sees concrete applications of the multicultural, organizational, and political theories being discussed, and this makes the lessons much more meaningful.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the heart of the book. In these chapters, the authors explore the shortcomings of the politics of universalism, which assumes that institutions can ensure equal opportunities and avoid discrimination by difference-blind policies and practices. They examine how difference-blind logics actually perpetuate a racial hierarchy and silence minority concerns. The authors discuss the inherent problems in establishing trust in multiracial communities, because some Whites fear raising racial issues, and some people of color distrust such silence. Larson and Ovando recognize the general tendency to deny that differences matter, and they argue that these differences need to be addressed, not hidden, given divergent worldviews and filtering biases that always cause us to reject some ideas and accept others. The authors contend that, instead of universalism, we should embrace the “politics of difference,” recognizing and dealing with our differences in constructive ways.

The authors note that the neutrality principle is at the core of universalism, with many educators believing that they are acting in a color-blind fashion and being objective and neutral in their treatment of all children regardless of race, language, gender, or ethnicity. Larson and Ovando equate this posture with the vain efforts to achieve governmental neutrality toward religion in our nation. Supporting the authors’ position, Steven Smith (1995) has observed that a theory of religious neutrality is impossible to articulate, as whoever is specifying the theory always is espousing a particular perspective, which is like trying to draw a square circle. Smith’s analogy seems equally relevant to efforts to apply a neutrality principle in dealing with children in our public schools. As Larson and Ovando assert, educators are not neutral, acultural, or apolitical—their knowledge and skills are shaped by their particular social, cultural, political, and moral commitments, including their prejudices. Understanding the futility of trying to be neutral and objective, or even contending that such a stance is possible, is the first step toward greater appreciation of our differences and greater respect for these differences.

The authors help us not only to recognize the institutionalization of racism, but also to realize that many well meaning educators may not be aware of their own biases and those that are part of the system in which they function. Acknowledging that all institutions are products of history, the authors declare that “in examining our history, we find that we have been much more intentional about advancing the stories of White heroes who fought against and ended slavery than we have been in facing the enormous damage that 350 years of slavery has done to American Indian and African American people in this

country today” (p. 119). They make a persuasive argument that teachers and school administrators should use the principles of justice, equity, and inclusion to interrogate policies, logics, and social actions that are historically rooted in domination of one race, and they urge educators to strive to understand the world and its problems from perspectives other than their own.

Possibly the most salient aspect of the book is the thoughtful discussion of school-community interactions and the authors’ call for a different type of school-community relations. Larson and Ovando advocate inclusive models of parent involvement in diverse communities and shared decision making and collective sensemaking, which means that we engage in collaborative deliberations and reflection about our different worldviews concerning school and community issues in an effort to reach understandings that result in justifiable policies (see Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). The authors maintain that only by changing from the traditional public relations model used by most schools to more community engagement can we move away from accepting the established system as the standard against which all behaviors are measured. In short, we must adopt new strategies in order to scrutinize and improve the system.

Larson and Ovando argue that the concept of double-loop learning needs to replace the current single loop learning that is so prevalent in closed systems, including most schools (see Argyris & Schon, 1978; Morgan, 1986). In a single-loop process, educators compare environmental information against established norms and try to eradicate nonconforming behavior. In contrast, with double-loop learning we do not simply measure what we perceive against accepted institutional norms and logics, we question whether the norms and logics are appropriate and perhaps alter them. The authors note that zero-tolerance policies, which have become popular across school districts, run counter to a recognition of students’ differences in that such policies are designed to maintain precise norms regarding what is considered acceptable behavior regardless of the context. They also point out that if double-loop learning had been used in addressing the issues in the Jefferson Heights School District, some of the community conflict might have given way to deeper understanding of the differences involved.

Although not a central feature of *The Color of Bureaucracy*, the lessons in this book have significant implications for a number of current school reform initiatives, including standards-driven curriculum, high-stakes testing, report cards for schools, and especially efforts to privatize schooling. An underlying premise of marketplace models, such as voucher proposals and some charter school plans, is that homogeneity within individual schools should take precedence over diversity. Social homogeneity is considered important to a school’s performance because it reduces conflict about goals—each school has to attract only a small slice of the market (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Under these marketplace models, diversity within school communities is reduced,

so minority voices may not be heard. Moreover, the guiding value is concern for individual choice rather than the common good. Warren Bennis (1990) observed more than a decade ago that “America has always been at war with itself. We have always dreamt of community and democracy but always practiced individualism and capitalism” (p. 102). *The Color of Bureaucracy* reinforces that this conflict remains with us in the twenty-first century.

The authors provide substantial enlightenment about why racism, classism, and other types of biases exist, but some of the repetition across chapters in making these points could have been eliminated. And more discussion of strategies to reduce prejudices would have been appreciated. Not until the last chapter do the authors refer to the appendix that contains an excellent list of films that can assist people in reflecting on their own biases and interrupting racial and ethnic myths. Suggestions for inservice sessions for school board members would have been particularly helpful because, contrary to the sentiments of one board member quoted, only the school board acting as a body has legal authority to make personnel decisions. Thus, if school board members can acquire new attitudes and commitments to social justice, the impact on school staffing decisions could be significant. Also, the reader would welcome recommendations for strategies to change teacher and administrator behavior and to revamp the preparation of educators to enable them to exert leadership in breaking the cycle of prejudices and inequities in our schools. Only one page in the final chapter is devoted to implications for teacher and administrator preparation. Perhaps the authors will focus on this topic in their next book.

Larson and Ovando also do not directly address whether there are state policies that can assist in such bias reduction. Does the state have an obligation to promote certain values at the core of a pluralistic society, such as honesty, respect for diversity, and the belief that all individuals should have equal opportunities to be heard and to participate in discourses affecting them? Should local communities with minimal governmental constraints be able to dictate the content of public education and the values to which students are exposed, if these communities choose to perpetuate discrimination based on race, language, class, gender and religion (see Tyack, 1982)? In short, what is the government’s responsibility in a democracy to facilitate the reduction of these institutionalized biases, particularly in communities that are not inclined to address prejudice reduction themselves?

Despite these minor reservations, *The Color of Bureaucracy* is an important book because it helps us to see our schools and communities in new and meaningful ways. It should be widely read and discussed by educators at all levels. Such discussions can be a first step toward acquiring the “inquiry processes” that Larson and Ovando contend can “make individual and group learning possible,” so we can start eradicating, rather than rationalizing, the serious inequities in education (p. 166). After reading this book, I thought

about Abraham Lincoln's often-quoted observation that the philosophy permeating the classroom in one generation will permeate the government in the next. All of us need to consider carefully the values that are guiding current educational decisions because much more than public schooling is at stake.

References

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