

LAYING A
FOUNDATION
FOR EQUITY

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SCHOOLTALK

RETHINKING WHAT WE
SAY ABOUT—AND TO—
STUDENTS EVERY DAY

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This might be a deeper dive into race labels than you were expecting. But after working with thousands of educators on this material, I'm convinced that a head-on discussion of *race labels themselves* equips us for equity effort of all kinds. It helps us get in the habit of questioning various *inaccurate and devaluing* notions about “types of people,” while recognizing how real experiences *with* grouping shape our lives and require attention in schools.

So, collect any gold nugget ideas that you might use later with others, and draw parallels to other labels we use in schools whenever you can. The **THINK/DISCUSS** questions along the way and at the end of the chapter should help you out.

Race labels and schooltalk

Are you used to thinking about the U.S. population as a handful of fundamentally different “kinds of people”? Here's one chart for California:

Population Today: California vs. the United States:

	CA	US
White persons, percent, 2011	74.0%	78.1%
Black persons, percent, 2011	6.6%	13.1%
American Indian and Alaska Native persons, percent, 2011	1.7%	1.2%
Asian persons, percent, 2011	13.6%	5.0%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander persons, percent, 2011	0.5%	0.2%
Persons reporting two or more races, percent, 2011	3.6%	2.3%
Persons of Hispanic or Latino Origin, percent, 2011	38.1%	16.7%
White persons not Hispanic, percent, 2011	39.7%	63.4%

Source: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06000.html>.

These categories aren't genetically valid subgroups of humans. But the census collects real social data—it collects data on groups long *labeled* as being

“races.” At this point, race labels are a social reality built on a biological fiction.

Race labels embody what Ashley Montagu called “man’s most dangerous myth.”³⁰ It’s the myth that our variations in appearance indicate that we are fundamentally different types of people on the inside.

Over the past five or six hundred years, this myth has undergirded several linked falsehoods about humans that have shaped U.S. life fundamentally and still affect us deeply in schools:

MYTH 1: There are subgroups to the human species called “races” that are different biologically.

MYTH 2: Your inner worth, abilities, skills, traits, and talents are linked to your outer appearance.

MYTH 3: Some such subgroups are more worthy of rights, opportunities, and privileges.

These myths still shape how we see and treat students every day in schools. So, let’s gallop through six hundred years of history to share some critical facts we need for our schooltalk. We’ll explore how:

- * Racial categories were created by human beings, even though they are genetically inaccurate.
- * Laws made racial categories central to who got which opportunities, creating race-class inequalities still with us today.
- * Science supported false ideas about racial “types of people” to justify such distributions of opportunity, bolstering harmful and false ideas about “races” that remain with us—including in schools.

You’ll see that this gallop leaves us at the brink of a Core Tension for Group Talk today. To support young people, we have to *both* reject these false labels for types of people, *and* wield such labels to describe and address a world long organized around them.

So to lay the foundation for equity effort, let’s flip some scripts about human difference that have done folks some serious harm.

THINK / DISCUSS

As we go: do you need to know and discuss foundational race information like this to reshape schooltalking of all kinds in the service of equity?

A gallop through six hundred years of history—for educators

In the mid-1400s in Spain, the early Spanish word “*raza*,” or “race,” first appeared in “purity of blood” laws that forced people to try to prove their family ancestry was Christian, not Jewish or Muslim, in order to get status positions and other privileges.³¹ Yes, this matters to schooltalk today.

Europeans colonizing the New World circa 1500 and beyond enslaved Africans, and in some locations indigenous Americans, to work land. Simultaneously, they developed deep and lasting ideologies to explain those being dominated economically and socially as inferior types of people deserving such treatment. Audrey Smedley calls this justificatory ideology a “racial worldview” that persists today.³² In essence, this worldview was the idea that racial subtypes of humans existed and that some deserved opportunity more than others.

THINK / DISCUSS

Do such “worldviews” about types of students operate in the schools you know, justifying moments when some students get more opportunities than others?

As anthropologist Roger Sanjek notes, people have long divided up resources along various made-up lines of rank or caste.³³ Some have tried to dominate or even own other people and accordingly called them inferior types of people, sometimes along lines of appearance and sometimes not. Smedley notes that for centuries (starting in the 1100s), for example, the English called the Irish “savages” and “heathens” who deserved or even needed colonial domination; James Sweet details the Portuguese denigration of Africans long before Columbus.³⁴ Europeans carried this same ideology to the New World,

treating diverse Native Americans across the Americas as an inferior type of person who could be displaced from land or forced into labor.³⁵ Post-1400s colonialism and slavery extended and solidified such ideology in a particular way to limit access to wealth, power, and social privilege. For the first time, Europeans built a systemic hierarchy focused on physical appearance, through both laws and pseudoscience. As Carol Mukhopadhyay puts it, “racial labels and categories, like all terms and concepts, are human-made classifying devices that we learn, internalize, and then use to interpret the everyday world in which we live. But conventional American racial categories are rooted in colonialism, slavery, and an elaborate ideology developed to justify a system of racial inequality.”³⁶

THINK / DISCUSS

As we continue to gallop, consider: how are laws, and appeals to science, involved in producing and reinforcing the other categories we use in schools?

The role of laws in making categories

The word “white” formally entered the American vocabulary in our slave laws, to gradually name Europeans as a type of “free” person who could be paid for their labor in contrast to African slaves.³⁷ As historian Winthrop Jordan put it, “After about 1680, taking the colonies as a whole, a new term appeared—*white*.”³⁸ Laws and public documents increasingly declared that “Negroes,” or “black” people, could be permanently unpaid and “owned.”

The label “white” was all about restricting opportunity to some. European Americans gaining legal privileges as “whites”—to earn wages, vote, own land, and more—then wrote more laws to keep those privileges, threatening with physical violence anyone disobeying the laws.³⁹ Resistance continued from those enslaved and displaced; laws got even harsher. Laws gradually named “Negroes” as a type of person whose descendants would be enslaved and who wasn’t even allowed to learn to read or write, in case such learning would incite more rebellion. (African Americans pursued literacy nonetheless.)

U.S. laws also gradually named many other European immigrants, migrating largely at first from Western and Northern Europe, as “whites”—a type

of person who could become a citizen, own property, and vote (if male, that is). The Naturalization Act of 1790 explicitly reserved U.S. citizenship and its benefits to “free white persons.”⁴⁰ (This racial restriction of the ability to become a citizen was not fully rescinded until 1952; as Ian Haney López sums up, “From the earliest years of this country until just a generation ago, being a ‘white person’ was a condition for acquiring citizenship.”⁴¹) In 1882, the literally named “Chinese Exclusion Act,” intended to restrict U.S. jobs to “whites,” labeled “Chinese” immigrants as a type of person not allowed to migrate to the U.S. at all. (This law was not repealed until 1943, and stringent quotas still restricted the immigration of Asians for decades after.)⁴²

After the U.S. incorporated much of Mexico in 1848 as California and the Southwestern states, laws (e.g., in California) extended U.S. citizenship rights primarily to “White male citizen[s] of Mexico.”⁴³ Tomás Almaguer describes how labeling again restricted opportunity to some. Wealthier, land-owning Mexicans seen as descended more directly from Spaniards were more likely to be seen as deserving “white” citizenship and rights in the United States, while the lower class Mexican majority, often darker skinned and seen as more indigenous, were typically not deemed “white” by custom nor offered “white” privileges in practice, “despite being eligible for citizenship rights.” Instead, they were treated more like the “Indians” laboring at the bottom of California’s racial hierarchy.⁴⁴ As Gilbert González describes, U.S. families still tagged as “Mexican” were framed as “natural” laborers who had to be led by “whites,” and were gradually segregated into poorly resourced schools separate from “whites” in the Southwest and California—just as black people were. By the 1930s, several hundred thousand U.S. citizens of Mexican descent busy contributing to U.S. life were even erroneously deported to Mexico.⁴⁵

U.S. lawmakers continued to restrict the classification “white” and its attendant privileges to people of European descent. For example, Ian Haney López’s book *White by Law* shows U.S. residents from East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East suing, typically unsuccessfully, to be labeled “white” throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in order to access the benefits of citizenship as they lived U.S. lives.⁴⁶ Over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, various European immigrants initially discriminated against as “not quite white” (or as inferior subtypes of “whites”) in employment, housing, and immigration policy (like Irish Catholics in some cases, and Southern and Eastern Europeans in others) got socially included over time in the homogenized category “white” and its economic

benefits, while migration from Asia and citizenship chances for Asians in the United States were long restricted.⁴⁷ By law and by custom, the segregation of neighborhoods, schools, social spaces, and jobs was shaped along the made-up white/non-white binary, limiting access to U.S. opportunity even as “non-white” people contributed mightily to U.S. life.⁴⁸

In Chapter 2 (Inequality Talk), we’ll discuss in a bit more detail a specific aspect of this story: how centuries of “white”-made laws and customs ensuring that “whites” could get paid for their labor, secure better jobs and property, go to publicly funded schools and universities, and vote meant that “whites” overall accumulated more wealth than non-“whites,” forming the basis of the race-class inequality that still shapes our neighborhoods and schools. But for now, let’s start considering another issue foundational to schooltalk overall: how myths about “the races” got made. For centuries, “white” scientists led an effort to prove right a race-based system of opportunity, pumping myths into American life that still saturate our Group Talk today and disrupt efforts to accurately *see* every child.

The role of science in making categories

Remember, all ideas about “types of people” are made by people. Let’s gallop back for a second to 1735, when the slave trade was still going strong. A naturalist and botanist named Carl Linnaeus began classifying humans into four varieties: Europaeus, Americanus (by which he meant Native Americans), Asiaticus, and Africanus. He would publish this schema in a 1758 edition of his *Systema Naturae*. Rather than just describing such simplified types physically, Linnaeus presumed inner traits linked to “groups” physical appearance. For example, he described Europaeus as not just “white . . . eyes—blue” but also as “gentle, acute [smart], inventive . . . governed by laws.”⁴⁹

For several hundred years after this, scientists published presumptions that racial types existed and that these types were internally different—differentially moral, hard-working, attractive, peaceful or threatening, and smart. Through the 1800s and 1900s, European and U.S. researchers (including from emerging disciplines like anthropology and psychology) produced studies they argued “proved” the presumed inferiority of non-“whites”; the studies served to justify an economic and social hierarchy that already benefited “whites.”⁵⁰ As the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould documented, these scientists, deeming themselves “white,”

mismeasured skulls, assessed noses, and presumed character, repeatedly putting “white” on top and “black” at the bottom, with all other groups ranked in between.⁵¹ Advertisements and media then broadcast pseudo-science about “white” people as beautiful and morally pure; circulated “science”-fed anxieties about “Negro” people as threatening, aggressive, and hypersexual; and denigrated “Asians” and “Mexicans” respectively as inscrutable or lazy, to name just a few myths. As Gilbert González documents, for example, researchers studying what they called “the Mexican problem” cited each other’s unfounded claims well into the twentieth century, to argue that Mexican parents (working hard in U.S. companies on both sides of the border) “dislike[d] work,” “undervalued education, lacked leadership abilities, and were intellectually inferior,” as were supposedly their children.⁵²

Hand in hand with “science,” media distorting a diverse nation trained U.S. eyes and brains to see and *judge* people as members of separate races, hierarchically arranged. Such assumptions about presumed inner traits linked to outer appearance became a key aspect of what Smedley calls the U.S. racial worldview, a set of myths rooted in several centuries of “scientific” classification effort.

Consider which such worldviews affect other categories we use in schools today:

1. Idea of race categories as rigid and simple and permanent;
2. Outer appearances presumed to be indicators of inner traits and worth;
3. Simplicity of race categories, ignoring the true diversity of humanity;
4. Classifications hierarchically structured;
5. Classifications made by “scientists” made these race categories seem natural and legitimate.⁵³

Each of these scripted falsehoods about racial “types of people” still requires active challenge in our schooltalk today as we seek to accurately see and value every child. Research finds that U.S. viewers still associate positive traits more quickly with faces that look “white,” for example, or have physiologically negative reactions to images or scenarios involving “black” people (brow furrowing; sweating).⁵⁴ Scholars call this *implicit bias*, a bias we have but may not even consciously recognize.⁵⁵ Such unconscious reactions aren’t

born in babies. They develop out of lived immersion in centuries-old scripts about differentially valued “groups” that still circulate in the media, public life, and everyday conversations. We’ll address many of them in the chapters to come.

So how do we even start counteracting such long-standing, ingrained bias about “types of people”? One key step is to recognize our programming to assume false things about “groups.”

Even now, we still need to challenge six hundred years of programming to imagine fundamentally different subtypes of humans. If left unchallenged, deep notions about racial groups as fundamentally different (and differentially valuable) “types of people” derail equity efforts of all kinds. To create schools where we truly support every child, we can start by actively busting the myth that races are genetically real human subgroups.

THINK / DISCUSS

In addition to racial assumptions, what other assumptions about inner abilities, personalities, or values do we make in schools, based on outer characteristics? Name one example. Do those assumptions also need to be “busted” with equity in mind?

Here are additional points I often share in my own schooltalk with educators, university students, or youth, to start the process of flipping foundational scripts about race groups as genetic subgroups of human beings. I’ve truly needed every point to convince others as part of caring for young people. As an equity designer, which of the following facts might you share with an adult or young person, to pursue more accurate schooltalk about “types of people”?

Race facts to strengthen and inform your schooltalk

- * We are one human species sharing a gene pool without boundaries, not sub-races to the human race with fundamentally different genes.⁵⁶

- * Our various visual differences as humans—like skin color, hair type, nose shape, eye shape—are too insignificant (and arbitrary) a portion of our genetics to use to categorize human beings into a set of genetically distinct subgroups.⁵⁷
- * As anthropologist Nina Jablonski (author of *Skin*) wrote me in an email, for example, “Skin pigmentation genes account for a tiny proportion of our genetic makeup. . . . Taken together, all genes accounting for portions of the visible human phenotype [your appearance] constitute only a tiny fraction of our genome. The physical traits that have been used to classify people into ‘races’ are directly controlled by genes that constitute far less than 1% of our genome.”⁵⁸
- * The traits we use to mark “race” are also arbitrary. The authors of *How Real Is Race?* invite students to notice the many examples of human physical variability—like hairiness, height, hand shape, the ability to curl your tongue—and to ask, “why do U.S. racial categories emphasize some traits and ignore all the rest?”⁵⁹
- * Humans are 99.9 percent “the same,” genetically speaking. As a genome researcher put it bluntly in response to questions on www.genome.gov, “racial groups are not distinct biological groups.”⁶⁰
- * Why does skin look different? Our human ancestors originated in Africa, close to the equator. Natural selection favored darker skin (more melanin) to protect against folate deficiency (a threat to reproduction) caused by high UV radiation from intense sunlight. As humans migrated to areas with less sunlight, natural selection favored lighter skin to allow for sufficient absorption of Vitamin D.⁶¹ So, darker or lighter skin tells us mainly “about a human’s amount of ancestry relative to the equator.”⁶²
- * Our ancestors moved around the globe and had children with each other. As the *Race: The Power of an Illusion* website puts it, “No human group has been isolated long enough to evolve into a genetically distinct race.”⁶³

- * If you zoom in and look at a human's genetic code, there are no clear markers on it saying what "race" you are. You can only see the regions of the world through which some of your genetic ancestors migrated.⁶⁴
- * "We are all more related than we have been taught to think."⁶⁵ The National Geographic film *Human Family Tree* showed a diverse community in Queens exploring their ancestors' migration histories—and realizing they were far more related as humans than they expected!
- * If you got all humans in one room, you'd see physical traits (nose shapes, skin colors) scattered and shared all over the world.⁶⁶ We'd then walk across the room to join new groups if you asked us to categorize ourselves by hair type, vs. nose shape, vs. tooth type! If we arbitrarily used height to create new "races" of people, Mukhopadhyay and colleagues point out in *How Real Is Race*, "African Tutsis and European Swedes would be in the same race. African Mbuti, Filipinos, Vietnamese, and some Eastern Europeans and Russians would end up in the same race."⁶⁷
- * And even if you lined us all up by skin tone, there would be no clear line where one "race" ends and another begins. As Alan Goodman puts it, "Skin color, the physical characteristic that Americans most often use to falsely distinguish racial groups, itself cannot be classified into clear-cut 'types' of 'colors.'"⁶⁸
- * Genetically, humans are more diverse *inside* any population we've called a "race group" than genetically different from people from other "race groups." Most genetic variability actually exists between individuals. And Africa, with more than a billion individuals, contains the most genetic diversity in the world.⁶⁹

People often bring up disease patterns (like susceptibility to sickle cell anemia) or sports (the many Africans or African Americans who have won high-profile track competitions) at this point in an effort to argue that races "really exist" biologically. Here are responses I've collected for this purpose. Again, I've needed every one in my schooltalk:

- * The “Race: How Different Are We?” exhibition by the American Anthropological Association clarifies that “certain diseases are more common among people with a particular ancestry than among the general population. But racial categories are just too big and imprecise to indicate anything medically meaningful about a person’s ancestry. In order to be truly pertinent, the data gathered in medical studies must track ancestry at the level of specific country or region.” For example, sickle cell anemia (an environmental adaptation to the threat of malaria) is more prevalent in western Africa than southern Africa and in southern Europe than northern Europe. Those of northern European ancestry are more at risk for cystic fibrosis than those of southern European ancestry, even while both are considered “white” on the U.S. Census.⁷⁰
- * Acquired diseases that are more prevalent in certain populations, such as a disproportionate experience of heart disease among African Americans, are a function of lived experiences, such as poverty, stress, discrimination, diet, or pollution.⁷¹
- * While different countries often do well at different sports in the Olympics, this doesn’t show that biologically we are different “races,” but rather that we pursue different sports. Some of our ancestors may have passed us body parts shaped well for a particular sport, but that doesn’t mean we are different subgroups of the human species.⁷²
- * Finally, the very perception of the “race group” we are in shifts depending on context. If a person considered “white” in Brazil comes to the U.S. and is relabeled “black” or “Latino,” the fabricated nature of these groupings becomes apparent.⁷³ The groups we call “races” are social categories that people made and perpetuate—categories that even shift depending on context. As the authors of *How Real Is Race* conclude, “there are no reliable procedures for dividing humans into races!”⁷⁴

I often say flippantly to teachers that Americans could have organized power and privilege along the lines of foot size; or that organizing opportunity around blood type would have made more sense in genetic terms.

Instead, those in power organized much of our opportunity around skin color, noses, eye shape, and hair—genetically insignificant characteristics that could simply be seen. Every time we look at people with different appearances and think they are fundamentally different on the inside, we are activating six hundred years of programming to think so.

Do you feel like you knew all that? Many people don't. Sharing and discussing these facts is foundational to schooltalk for equity, because it reminds us that we are all *equally human*—and equally valuable.

THINK / DISCUSS

Do educators need to learn and talk to each other (or to students) about the history of race categories in order to teach successfully in America? Why or why not?

STRATEGY

Share our six-hundred-year “gallop” and other information in this chapter to communicate to colleagues and students that race categories are not genetic realities—humans made them socially real through six hundred years of unequal treatment.

Schooltalk for equity has to bust a lot of myths about “types of people.” As we'll discuss in later chapters, the scripted and programmed biases and snap judgments of prior centuries stay in our brains automatically despite our best intentions. We also still have the opportunity systems “race” built—and we've come up with all sorts of mythic explanations for those too.

I often walk around my campus noting how my brain automatically categorizes people racially, even as I know this history. Historian Robin Kelley succinctly notes that race “is not about how you look, it is about how people assign meaning to how you look.”⁷⁵ If I stay aware, I can literally feel my brain assign meaning. That is, I note how in addition to categorizing people, my brain automatically attaches judgments to categorizations. Without intending to, I make snap presumptions about who might be a hard worker, or about who might steal something from my car if I don't lock it. In “Bike Thief,” a videoed experiment testing such stereotypes, two boys and a girl (who respectively looked “white,” African American, and

“white”) each pretended in sequence to be sawing a bike lock off a bike in a mostly white suburban neighborhood. People walked past the white boy without much reaction. They angrily asked the black boy why he was trying to steal the bike. Many asked the white girl if she needed help.⁷⁶

Whenever I find myself snapping to judgment without really knowing people, I remind myself that I’m programmed to think with such “scripts.” Acknowledging my programming helps me start to actively reject it. Researchers have shown that we can begin to counteract this automated “assignment of meaning” if we become conscious of it and try to refuse it with “counter-stereotypic thoughts” and accurate facts about real people.⁷⁷

As Jordan, an African American high school student, told researcher Na’ila Nasir,

“I think [stereotypes about African American students] just has been instilled in the American mindframe . . . even though I don’t want to categorize someone, but there are certain stereotypes that pop in your head and you have to catch yourself and say, no, that’s not true. But it’s gonna take a lot.”

As Nasir notes, Jordan understood “that the stereotypes about black males (a demographic group to which he belongs) are so strong that he had to actively work to remind himself that they lacked truth.”⁷⁸ He had to flip the script about himself.

We’ll explore various schooltalk scripts about “types of people” in the chapters to come. For now, note that researchers suggest that if we notice how we snap to old ideas about some “types of people” as more or less threatening, moral, hardworking, beautiful, trustworthy, smart, and deserving of opportunity, we can begin to resist such thoughts and replace them with a refusal to stereotype—and with a commitment to seeking accurate facts about actual people. And so, to counteract my own programming, I notice it and work to reject it. I sometimes think silently to a stranger on campus, “I actually know nothing about you. But my brain is programmed to categorize you. And the world still categorizes us both.”

THINK / DISCUSS

Look around at any collection of strangers and notice whether your brain automatically categorizes people. What's one categorization you noticed your brain making? Did your brain attach a judgment about that "type of person"? Did you have evidence for the judgment? What "counter-stereotypic" thought could you think instead?

All of us get put in categories by others every time we walk outside.

And here's perhaps the toughest part to handle in our schooltalk—even as we resist stereotype, we often need to wield categories and labels to describe and handle the system already made.⁷⁹

As we put it in *Everyday Antiracism*,

In a world that has been organized for six centuries around bogus biological categories invented in order to justify the unequal distribution of life's necessities, some antiracist activity refuses to categorize people racially. Other antiracist activity recognizes people living as racial group members in order to analyze and transform a racially unequal world.⁸⁰

We'll consider a "world" (and schools) organized around such categories in next chapters, and the schooltalk needed to address student experiences in such a world. Even though we don't belong to biologically distinct or differentially valuable "types of people," we do need labels to describe real experiences with the inequalities and myths race labels have brought us—and to help describe the identities, strengths, and contributions people have forged along the way. So, while we work to counteract additional inaccurate scripted myths about "race groups," we'll work to *accurately* describe experience in a world that has treated us as members of "race groups" for a very long time. In short, we'll use race labels only to support young people!

For now, note that sometimes the same category that harmfully oversimplifies people when imposed by others can be seized on purpose by people in the group for self-description and self-empowerment. Researchers have called this (re: race categorization) "strategic racialization."⁸¹ As Ta-Nehisi Coates muses in his opus on African American experiences, "They made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people."⁸²

Such aggregated self-labeling negotiates a world of categories and helps to *describe and address actual shared experience* (negative and positive) in such a world, despite the vast human diversity inside any “group.” At various moments in U.S. history, African Americans have strategically seized and positively reframed categories others used to harm, proudly reclaiming labels like “black” to analyze shared experience, claim social contributions, counteract damaging myths about African Americans, pursue economic empowerment, and connect to the larger African diaspora. Americans from many Latin American origins have aggregated as “Latinos” for political power, social recognition, representation in voting and labor, and community action.⁸³ Analysts note that both the more self-chosen category “Latino” (building in recent decades) and the more bureaucratic label “Hispanic” (used by the census starting in the 1970s) lump together a very diverse U.S. population with widely varying experiences, even as Latinos in the aggregate have various shared experiences in the U.S., including, as we’ll see, patterns of access to opportunity.⁸⁴ Native Americans can describe shared experiences, including with non-Native institutions, *while* describing the vast diversity and knowledges across more than five hundred Native American tribal communities; activists wielding constitutional law have asserted critical language, cultural, and economic rights *as* Native American and Indigenous peoples.⁸⁵ As Yen Le Espiritu puts it, in “Asian American” movements in the 1960s, “the pan-Asian concept, originally imposed by non-Asians, became a symbol of pride and a rallying point for mass mobilization by later generations,” with many lumping “panethnically” as “Asian American” “to be politically and economically effective” and to address common problems with exclusion and discrimination.⁸⁶ Today, many researchers and communities prioritize teaching such group histories to young people, so students can powerfully define themselves and position themselves (and others) accurately as part of long histories of rich contribution, struggle, and striving in a world of categories even while analyzing their own complex contemporary lives.⁸⁷ We’ll just scratch the surface of such necessary stories in the chapters to come, in our ongoing quest for accurate description and schooltalk that values every child.

THINK / DISCUSS

Can you think of any school category that is both imposed on people, and wielded for strength by the people in it? When is the category helpful or harmful for those described? (Gilberto Arriaza writes that as a Guatemalan forced to migrate to the United States by the civil wars of the 1980s, “upon arrival, I was immediately labeled . . . as Latino, brown, second-language speaker. The options for me, then, were to be colonized by the labels or adopt the labels as sources of power. I took the latter option.”⁸⁸)

People “lumping” themselves together for specific purposes (including to address real experiences in a world of “groups”) doesn’t indicate a lack of internal diversity. The U.S. census “mark one or more races” (check all that apply) policy in 2000 allowed for fifty-seven different possible self-reported category combinations; youth increasingly insist on multiple “boxes.”⁸⁹ Indeed, people labeling themselves on the 2010 census wrote in more than twenty categories just under the umbrella of “Asian.”⁹⁰ And every individual human counted on that census had a complicated individual life.

Let’s end by again expanding these Group Talk issues beyond race. To communicate toward equity with any Group Talk, educators may have to accept a Core Tension:

CORE TENSION

Schooltalk for equity describes all people as individuals too complex for labels. Schooltalk for equity *also* labels shared experiences and needs in order to address them.

That’s why the foundation of schooltalking for equity is to consider the pros and cons (for young people) of every word we use and encounter in schools.

The chapters to come are full of examples of how to do this.