



Taking it Personally: Racism in the Classroom from Kindergarten to College. Ann Berlak and Sekani Moyenda. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001. 216pp.

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On the back cover of this book, Bill Ayers writes, "*Taking it Personally* needs a warning label: DANGER, it should announce, IDEAS UNDER INTENSE PRESSURE. OPEN AT YOUR OWN RISK." Dr. Ayers is not exaggerating. This book is not just a text, it is an intense reading experience and I would anticipate a similar experience for every reader, regardless of race.

Ann Berlak is a white Jewish professor teaching a cultural and linguistic diversity course in a teacher education program. She invites her former student Sekani Moyenda, a black elementary technology teacher, to make a presentation in the class. The resulting "classroom trauma," as Berlak describes, is a life changing experience for the students and the authors. It will be for the readers of this account as well. Moyenda's message to the class--that white teachers should not teach children of color--is the beginning of a journey that is intimately personal, often painful, life-altering, and yet, optimistic.

After we get to know the authors through their intimately personal autobiographies, Moyenda describes her "Racism Boot camp" presentation followed by Berlak's processing of the event. Berlak shares the mostly white students' initial reactions and their follow-up journaling. Her interpretations of the students' reactions become thought-provoking lessons in areas of racism that many of us have not encountered. Her heavily referenced text helps the reader understand why her students so readily questioned Moyenda's expertise, why they were offended by her use of the word "militant," and why they felt that the anger that was generated and displayed during the experience was inappropriate for the college classroom. The pathology of "institutional racism" is clearly demonstrated as she takes us through issues of feelings, language, silence, and career intentions in relation to race.

Moyenda's ability to express her perspectives and her willingness to engage in this painful process is a testimony to her life's struggle against racism. Her text is intensely engaging. Her response to students' reactions is communicated to them in writing. This love letter, written in response not only to the initial presentation but also to subsequent similar presentations, answers student's questions and explains how she



would have handled LaTipha, a student profiled in the boot camp role-play. Moyenda's answers and explanations provide a riveting and devastating critique of the racism imbedded in our society. For me, her answers evolved into a powerful and honest plea for the rest of us "white folk" to wake up. She challenges whites to forget their "white privilege" and come to terms with who they really are. Her declaration that European Americans often lose site of their racial identity by being "white" thrusts the white reader into an emptiness filled with questions of self, power, and purpose.

But we are not left only with questions. The optimism that is evoked while reading the book is based in the realization that it offers a sense of what may be needed to bring teacher-education students to understand what "critical multiculturalism" really is. Berlak shares the specific steps she used to "teach students to use a framework in which systemic group differences in institutional power are central" (p. 92). However, after realizing that many of her students did not interpret Sekani's presentation as was intended, Berlak explains what she learned, namely, that she had been using the language of "liberal multiculturalism" as she was attempting to operate from a "critical multicultural" perspective. It is not enough for these students to merely "get it," as Jim (the teacher who fails in the role-play) declares towards the end of the course. Rather they need to be taken to the uncomfortable level of questioning one's sense of self in relation to the "other."

One of the many strengths of *Taking it Personally* is that it is thoughtfully contextualized through the brutally honest autobiographies of the authors. Both author's perspectives are provided along with the issues they believe need to be addressed, allowing the reader to understand the deep complexities of the issues. As a review should present any weaknesses in the book, I found it frustrating that the students' responses to Berlak's debriefing question, "Should I invite Sekani back?" and "Should I ask her to change her presentation in any particular way?" were not presented and analyzed in detail. However, because the students' perspectives and responses were the focal point of the book, the authors may have found this analysis to be redundant.

Taking it Personally could be an extremely effective text for a cultural diversity course in a teacher-preparation program. There is a wealth of powerful content that shows how institutional racism prevents students of color from succeeding and how white teachers are ill equipped to teach them. The in-depth analyses by Moyenda and Berlak are loaded with essential terms, relevant concepts and issues, and the notes and references read like a "who's who" in racism literature.



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In summary, I read the warning label, took the risk, and will be a more effective teacher for doing so. Don't pass up your opportunity.

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