The
Unscripted
Series

Topic: Systemic Racism

About

There are scripts running all the time in our classrooms that tell us how to act, what to say, what's right and what isn't. When scripts come together to organize how we collectively think about and see the world they become ideological systems. Although ideologies are invisible and aren't easily attributed to any one person they are powerful forces that create, maintain and advance social institutions (E.g. Education systems, economic systems, criminal justice systems, etc.). These social systems exercise their power by rewarding and punishing individuals and groups according to what the system determines to be acceptable or unacceptable. In the sections below, we hope to help you critically reflect on how ideologies are systematically deployed through our social systems to either empower (humanize) or oppress (dehumanize) individuals and groups. We know that we will only scratch the surface, but if we can help you become a little more conscious of how systems work we will have taken a significant step toward dismantling racism and unpacking the power of oppressive scripts that shape our lives today.

What?

There are lots of systems that organize our society. The education system is a big one, but there are also others like the health system, criminal justice system, government systems and many more. These large systems consolidate power, wealth and other resources. When we discuss systemic racism, we make an important shift from helping student explore their personal prejudices and bias that contribute to racist behavior to helping students unpack how self-perpetuating systems work to create culturally oppressive narratives and laws that dehumanize minority groups. To get started, it is important to explore how systems turn unique individuals (who are subjects) into anonymous racial categories (or objects). This process of objectification is dehumanizing and becomes particularly insidious when deployed through large systems. In the next section, we will explore a concrete example of redlining to illustrate how the government systematically propagated an idea that minorities are undesirable through the housing system which oppressed the Black community while simultaneously advanced the economic interests and social control for White majorities.

So What?

Throughout the history of the United States, White majorities have used their power to create, maintain and perpetuate systems that oppress other minority groups in order to advance their own economic interests and maintain social control. For instance, the National Housing Act of 1934 led to the practice of "redlining" where powerful government agencies systematically denied housing to Blacks across the country using the construct of race. Federal agents outline neighborhoods on policy maps that had high percentages of racial minority groups living there. These communities were labeled as undesirable and used by other powerful systems to guide decision making. For example, public and private Investments were discouraged in redlined districts. Banks used redlining policy maps to deny loans to Blacks. Over time, Black neighborhoods languished as crucial capital and aid was systematically withheld by those in power. Racially segregated neighborhoods, schools and business to this day can be traced back to the effects of racially prejudicial policies like this. Practices like redlining could be considered an obvious example of how consolidated power can be used to oppress others, however, power doesn't only reside with majority groups. Minority groups and vulnerable populations have power too. Adults only need to spend a few hours with children to learn this lesson. It is certainly a humbling experience to watch how powerful and savvy kids can be when they want something you don't want them to have. Whether is a persisting cry, devastating look of disappointment, or just persistent badgering that inevitably wears you down - kids have power and they know how to use it. As you explore power, be mindful of how it is consolidated in language and deployed in systems. However, don't miss other ways that power can be expressed and take different forms. Oppressive forms of power actively work to dehumanize us but emancipatory power animates us and liberates us to become more aware of our agency and how we can affect change.

Now What?

As you continue to reflect on systemic racism are some additional resources for consideration for discussion:
- Explore "Digital Harrisburg" to interact with redlining maps of the capital of Pennsylvania https://digitalharrisburg.com/exhibits/race-and-place/
- Washington Post article "Redlining was banned 50 years ago. It's still hurting minorities today." https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/03/28/redlining-was-banned-50-years-ago-its-still-hurting-minorities-today/
- "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Knapsack Peggy McIntosh http://convention.myacpa.org/houston2018/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/UnpackingTheKnapsack.pdf
- "How Studying Privilege Systems Can Strengthen Compassion" | Peggy McIntosh at TEDxTimberlaneSchools (18:26) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-BY9UEewHw
- NPR's "A 'Forgotten History' Of How The U.S. Government Segregated America" https://www.npr.org/2017/05/03/526655831/a-forgotten-history-of-how-the-u-s-government-segregated-america
- Edutopia Teaching Young Children About Bias, Diversity, and Social Justice https://www.edutopia.org/blog/teaching-young-children-social-justice-jinnie-spiegler
- YouTube video Systemic Racism Explained https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrHIQIO_bdQ
- Online article "Is My School Racist?" by Brian Willoughby https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2013/is-my-school-racist