

For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education

reviewed by Ali Michael – July 05, 2016

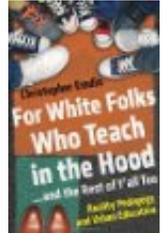
Title: For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education

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Publisher: Beacon Press, Boston

ISBN: 0807006408, **Pages:** 220, **Year:** 2016

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I have to admit that the title *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...* did not speak to me at first. Maybe because I no longer teach in the hood, or because even when I did, I never would have used that term to describe where I taught; I am not that cool and I am also white. Maybe because Chris Emdin often uses hip hop in his work and I feel like an imposter when trying to use this music to connect with students. To make matters worse, because it is something I feel like I should be able to know and do, I just end up feeling incompetent and ignorant when I try. Before I started to read this book, I wondered whether I will be able to access Emdin's work, given my whiteness and relative lack of cool?

But Emdin makes it clear upfront that white folks are not the only ignorant students of the hood as one might think when they hear this title. Emdin uses himself, disarmingly and humbly, to demonstrate time and again the ways that he had to learn about his students, their families, and their communities in order to connect as a teacher. He writes of *I, me, we, and us* and admits his own shortcomings and weaknesses as a novice teacher: "The stereotypes *we* brought into that school auditorium shaped *our* understandings not only of the students *we* would be teaching but also of what it means to teach" (p. 36, emphasis added). Emdin invites readers in by demonstrating that all teachers, including himself, must engage in a concerted process to move past stereotypes and see their students clearly rather than demanding that their learners assimilate into a certain model of student that renders their individuality and history invisible.

If it were easy, if Emdin could just connect with students because he was Black or grew up in the hood himself (which he did), this book would not be so powerful. But he had to learn his students and create a step-by-step process for building a learning environment around his students' lives and cultures for himself. What he gives us here, in an incredible act of generosity and translation, is a guide to building connections with students in ways that are directly related to teaching and learning. The book includes immediately implementable strategies with evident results.

Emdin literally takes readers and teachers with whom he has worked into Black Pentecostal churches and barber shops to take notes on a *process* of interacting, learning, building community, and speaking that leads to engagement and evokes an emotional response that is possible in the classroom although not common. As his story weaves in and out of different community spaces, I wondered whether I, as a young teacher, had any idea that such spaces held meaning and sanctity for the students whom I taught. If I did, which I doubt, I certainly did not realize that these spaces might hold lessons for me as a teacher in understanding my students and building a classroom that felt like home. Never would I have known how to access such spaces for the sake of learning how to teach. Emdin provides the rationale, inspiration, and practical steps for doing just that and it is not voyeuristic or essentializing in any of the ways that one might imagine it could be.

Emdin's strategies are never too simplistic to seem annoying, obvious, or underestimating of his audience and yet he provides basic instructions for all of the strategies he recommends: learning cultural styles from community institutions (like churches), getting to know the school neighborhood, developing cogenerative teams to advise the teacher, having students co-teach to demonstrate and generate lessons that resonate, putting students in differential skill level buddy pairs he calls *cosmo duos*, and more. He spares no detail in setting up teachers for success. For example, in describing cogenerative teams he suggests, "Teachers should make every effort to have food available for the students once they arrive" (p. 72). He emphasizes process as much as content with an explanation of the value of breaking bread together for building trust and community.

Emdin's strategies are never too simplistic, nor are his ideas so complex that they would be out of reach for educators of any background. He shares illustrative examples not for the sake of encouraging a replication of lessons but to demonstrate the salience and effectiveness of his processes, which will help teachers develop their own robust lessons in support of their particular students and learning communities. Emdin has thought of everything, including the inevitable questions that arise for teachers implementing a co-teaching strategy: When a student is co-teaching, where should the teacher sit? How should they set the student up for success? What do teachers do when inaccurate content is being taught? How do they respond without undermining their student co-teacher? All of his strategies are ideas I could implement in ways that would feel authentic, generative, and constructive in my classroom.

For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... is not exclusively about teaching Black children in the inner city. It is about teaching the neoindigenous in the hood and both are expansive categories that include all students from rural, urban, or suburban communities who "often look, act, and engage in the classroom in ways that are inconsistent with traditional school norms" (p. 9). It is also not exclusively about white folks in spite of the central role they get in the title. The book is about the teachers for whom traditional structures of education work. While that is not only white teachers, it is often the white teacher for whom school works. As a result, these teachers therefore have little idea of how to teach in a way that will work for neoindigenous students: those for whom traditional school does not work.

Although neoindigenous children in the hood have many different religions, cultural backgrounds, styles of learning, and ethnic and racial backgrounds, they have their neoindigeneity in common. Emdin designed reality pedagogy to be robust and flexible enough to include all of them and the strategies he introduces are great teaching methods. While economically privileged white children may benefit from such strategies too, they do not necessarily require them. What Emdin is saying is that because of the ways in which their entire history, community, existence, and cultural styles have been denigrated, neoindigenous children in the hood need styles of teaching that validate their experiences, ways of being, histories, and communities in order to learn. It is not just great teaching; it is critical teaching for children who have been the victims and survivors of colonization.

For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... held lessons for me in every chapter and many strategies I did not know I needed to know. I need all of it, every single word of it, to be an effective educator in any setting and I am so grateful to Emdin for making it plain. As for my early feelings of incompetence and ignorance, there is something to be said for teaching material in a way that feels within the grasp of every student in terms of knowledge, skill, connection, and meaning. Emdin does this with readers and teachers so that they can do it with their students.

Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: July 05, 2016
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 21362, Date Accessed: 8/8/2016 11:11:12 PM

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