

12-3-2008

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Recommended Citation

Wright, Lori, "New Book Details Prominent Role Racism And Sexism Play In K-12" (2008). *UNH Today*. 601.
<https://scholars.unh.edu/news/601>

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New Book Details Prominent Role Racism And Sexism Play In K-12

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December 3, 2008

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DURHAM, N.H. - Racism and sexism play a prominent role in today's classrooms, with behavior in some children starting in kindergarten, according to a new book authored by Sarah Stitzlein, assistant professor of education at the University of New Hampshire.

Stitzlein's book, "Breaking Bad Habits of Race and Gender: Transforming Identity in Schools," is the first to unite two major schools of educational philosophy, traditional American pragmatism and contemporary poststructuralism, to offer both theoretical and concrete suggestions for dealing with actual classroom oppression based on race and gender.

"Every day teachers encounter moments of racial and gender tension in their classrooms. In the most drastic cases, these situations erupt into overt conflict or violence, while in other instances they go largely unnoted. Such incidents reveal that despite equality legislation and the good intentions of many teachers, racial and gender problems persist," Stitzlein says.

Stitzlein's book also provides a historical overview of how oppression tied to race and gender has changed in America in kindergarten through 12th grade.

"Today, racism and sexism have become more internalized. They shape our behaviors and self-expectations about how we should walk, talk, and think. They shape our habits, including the way we move, talk, and interact with others," she says.

According to Stitzlein, overt sexism is more likely to occur in high school, but the more tacitly embodied behaviors of race and gender begin at early age - even in kindergarten.

"It's part of the process of becoming a human being in America. We pick it up through images and direct teachings, but also through the more subtle work of language -- the way we speak, are described, and respond to others," she says.

And while schools are one of the most common settings of race and gender discord, schools also are the primary locations for alleviating systems of oppression, she says. It is within schools that children learn how to enact and respond to race and gender.

To combat racism and sexism in the classroom, Stitzlein encourages teachers to have more direct and open conversations about how race and gender work in society and how they affect the lives of all students.

"I encourage teachers to make children uncomfortable with their racial positions, especially white students who live rather privileged lives. I also recommend that teachers help students reflect on themselves in ways that can make their habits of race and gender more flexible," she says.

Stitzlein's book has been well received by the education community.

"Stitzlein makes a great theoretical case for the intelligent treatment of race and gender in schools. This is an important and timely book that Rowman & Littlefield will be happy to have published," said Gregory Seals, College of Staten Island, CUNY.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a New England liberal arts college and a major research university with a strong focus on undergraduate-oriented research. A land, sea and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 11,800 undergraduate and 2,400 graduate students.

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