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Race – The Power of an Illusion

I began to explore this site by looking through the timeline on “Race, Science, and Social Policy.” My initial reaction was disappointment at how scientific reasoning and “experimentation” had been used so regularly to argue for white superiority in intellect and physical ability. Until 1911, every major scientist who examined the idea of race, usually through evidence collected from skeletal structure (especially skulls), formed the same conclusion: that whites had larger brains and were more physically adept.

Then, in 1911, a large conference was held in London full of the greatest scientists of the time who concluded that “the various peoples of the world [are], to all intents and purposes, essentially equal in intellect, enterprise, morality, and physique.” Unfortunately this conclusion went largely unheard and brought about no social or political change in the treatment of different races. Even in 1950, when the United Nations released an official statement declaring that there was no scientific basis for the claims of white supremacy, either mentally or physically, there was next to no impact on social policy or public attitudes about race.

However, change finally came in the form of 2 large scientific discoveries which coincided with the civil rights movements, both of which helped to end the idea of scientific support for racial differences. The first was the discovery that sickle cell anemia was not racially linked, as had previously been thought, but instead acted as a protection from malaria. Those areas with high instances of malaria turned out to be where sickle cell anemia occurred at the

highest rate, regardless of the racial makeup of that area. The second major discovery, in 1972, was at the genetic level when scientist Richard Lewontin found that the majority of human diversity occurs at the local level and that when populations are compared across cultures they are actually more similar, despite the difference in races.

Next, I decided to explore the “Human Diversity” link. The main point of this site was that there are absolutely no traits that are explicit to a single race. In other words there is no biological way to divide humanity along racial lines, there are far too many similarities across the races. I really liked this site because it delves into evolution and natural selection which is the unit we are coming up on in a few weeks. I think I will be able to incorporate quite a bit from this section of the site into one of my lessons on evolution. I’ve been struggling a bit with ways to incorporate multicultural ideas into my classroom and finding this article really got me excited about the discussion and lessons that could be learned here.

I also liked the teaching tips that were provided in this section. The author gives the idea to sort people based on specific traits (like eye color, lactose intolerance, tongue curling ability, etc.) to show that traits do not come packaged with race. I definitely think this is an activity I could utilize in my classroom as well. The site also suggests getting your mtDNA (mitochondrial DNA) tested to see who your genetic relatives are (through genetic origins - <http://www.geneticorigins.org>). The service is actually provided free; however, the form the DNA has to be sent to the lab in requires quite a bit of leg-work on the teachers end and some semi-advanced lab equipment, which our school unfortunately has none of. However, there are sites like 23andme.com that have been sequencing DNA with only a saliva sample, so hopefully that technology will spread to sites like this and it will become much easier for teachers to send in student DNA samples and be able to use that data in the classroom.

Finally, I checked out the “Where Race Lives” section of the site. This page focuses mostly on the monetary divide between whites and nonwhites. It discusses how, when the federal government stepped in create policies which would allow more Americans to purchase their own homes, these policies were fairly racist and made it very difficult for nonwhites to “attain the same resources and opportunities, resulting in deeply segregated communities and an enormous wealth gap between whites and nonwhites that persists to this day.” The page goes on to discuss how this gap has only widened in recent years, leading to large pockets of poverty within the U.S.

This section also provided several worthwhile teaching tips, although they would probably be more applicable in a social studies classroom instead of science one. I especially liked the tip that asked students to consider how segregated their own community was. It suggests having the students study the residential patterns of their area to determine if race has any link to residence. The next question goes along well with that activity and asks students to find a nearby community that is racially integrated. Then, students should study that community and find out what work has gone in to keeping it stable and prosperous.

Overall, I enjoyed this site, especially the fact that I was able to find quite a bit that I can incorporate into my classroom. I think the article in the “Human Diversity” section will prove to be the most beneficial and I will definitely have students read through it before we have a discussion on race and evolution sometime in the next couple weeks. Also, I like the idea of having my students sort people based on specific traits and hopefully they will arrive at the conclusion that there is no one particular trait associated with any certain race. Although I guess if they don’t arrive at that conclusion on their own, I could always prod them along until they get there.