I hesitate to write this post, but not talking about it is not helping either. Deeper learning has a race problem.

If you travel in deeper learning circles--go to conferences, teach classes, visit schools--you will notice that many of the faces, among both the teachers and the learners, are white. Sometimes this is directly acknowledged, and sometimes it is only implicit, but the reality is the reality--deeper learning in the U.S. is much more white than the nation as a whole.

In one sense, this is a story of exclusion. Deeper learning has historically been the province of the advantaged--those who could afford to send their children to the best private schools and to live in the most desirable school districts. Research on both inequality across schools and tracking within schools has suggested that students in more affluent schools and top tracks are given the kind of problem-solving education that befits the future managerial class, whereas students in lower tracks and higher-poverty schools are given the kind of rule-following tasks that mirror much of factory and other working class work. To the degree that race mirrors class, these inequalities in access to deeper learning are shortchanging black and Latino students.

Less frequently discussed is the fact that there is considerable skepticism of a certain kind of "deeper learning" among civil rights advocates (of all races), as well as among a large swath of parents, educators, and students. There are a number of issues here, some of which relate directly to race and some of which are about other factors, like religion and class status, which are frequently correlated to race. More research would be needed to sort this out. What is more apparent is the range of rationales that motivate opposition to deeper learning:

- "Deeper learning is for the privileged." There are several variants of this point. One argument is that the kind of open-ended exploration and play that is prized in inquiry-oriented instruction is fine for students who come with a significant background in "basic" or "core" knowledge and skills, but to pursue that approach with students who lack this background is likely to be ineffective and does little to build their basic knowledge and skills. I find that when I assign E.D. Hirsch's writings about the importance of "core knowledge" that it is African-American and Latino students (these are graduate students in education at Harvard) who are the most passionate supporters of his arguments because they think that this is the kind of cultural literacy that minority students need to survive in the modern world.

- "Certainty, hierarchy, and deeper learning." Deeper learning, at least the progressive variant that is popular in the contemporary U.S., entails a kind of appreciation of uncertainty and ambiguity, which, to its proponents, is one of the cardinal virtues of this approach. Deeper learning also assumes strongly that students are "meaning makers," young people whose views need to be taken as on par with those of adults. Communities that are more comfortable with the idea of hierarchy and adult certainty--be they religious communities where authority lies in God or ethnic communities in which truth is possessed by the elder generation--might be correspondingly less interested in education which invites students to see themselves as on par with their teachers or sees students' formations of their own opinions as a central goal of primary and secondary schooling.

- "Maslow's hierarchy of needs." At least within the advocacy community, many civil rights organizations are focused on what they see as the most basic problems--assuring that the most deprived students can read and do basic math, creating the out-of-school conditions that are needed for any kind of learning, and protecting minority students against capricious discipline problems or over-representation in special education. In this context, creating classrooms that enact "deeper learning" may not be at the top of the priority list.

- "We are not Finland." I was at a meeting last week in which the agenda of deeper learning and teacher professionalization came head to head with the concerns of civil rights advocates. Deeper learning advocates tend to make arguments associated with professionalization: If learning is to be complex, teachers need to be skilled workers and not compliance-oriented drones; annual standardized tests reduce education to the lowest common denominator and stand in the way of deeper learning; a better approach would be to professionalize teaching and move to less frequent or matrix-sampled assessments that would allow for much more complicated performance tasks that better reflect deeper learning. In response to this whole line of argument, civil rights advocates tend to worry that it puts too much trust in teachers, who, they point out, have failed their kids again and again. It also can put the cart
before the horse in that it potentially incentivizes schools to do so-called higher order tasks before assuring ourselves that all students can do more basic things. We are not Finland, these civil rights advocates like to say--if we want a system built on trust of those doing the educating, they will need to prove that their actions will yield a different result for kids who have historically been under-served by the system.

- "We are prisoners of our own educational experiences." Dan Lortie famously pointed out that teachers' teach the way they were taught; twelve years of apprenticeship of observation far outweighs a short period in teacher prep. The same goes for parents, legislators, and everyone else. So, if deeper learning experiences have historically been unequally distributed, that means that only people who had access to some of the best schools and teachers have really experienced "deeper learning" and thus they have a different picture in their heads of what schooling might look like than the vast majority who went through traditional schooling. David Cohen suggests that deeper learning might spread through a very slow revolution, where over decades, or even centuries, those who have experienced it will teach what it means to others, and the impact will gradually spread.

Under these circumstances, what is to be done? Here are a few modest suggestions; I'd welcome yours on Twitter or in the comments:

- We need to think hard about how to integrate core content and open-ended inquiry. Those who are skeptical of deeper learning are not wrong to think that there is certain basic knowledge and skill which serves as a foundation for much of what is to follow. But, at the same time, deeper learning proponents are right in terms of where they hope this foundational work will lead. Skilled teachers can organize around challenging and authentic questions and integrate core concepts and skills in the process of achieving those ends. The question is how to get this expertise dispersed much more widely in the field.

- Civil rights advocates and teacher professionalization proponents need to have a hard talk about deeper learning. It's on deeper learning proponents to argue the civil rights case for deeper learning--that joining the culture of power means doing one's own experiments and not just reading about experiments that others have done; such deeper experiences gives disadvantaged students the same opportunities to participate in the real world of the disciplines that the most advantaged students have long had. If they are able to convince civil rights proponents on this point, then there should be a way to work out the questions around accountability. As a design question, there should be a way to empower skilled teachers to be creative, assess individual students periodically, be able to fire the least-well-performing teachers, and yet for the most part treat teachers with the culture of respect that is needed for the profession to grow and thrive. Almost all of the parties could agree to each of these elements; there should be way to put them together that would be coherent.

- Deeper learning proponents need to respect the pluralism of different approaches to learning deeply. In the United States at this moment, deeper learning in K-12 schools tends to be associated with progressive schooling--deeper learning schools are said to be project-based, use portfolios to judge work, and so forth. But as I've written in an earlier post, no one has a monopoly on deep learning; in every religious or ethnic community there is some tradition through which people learn deeply. One question for deeper learning proponents is if there is a way to diversify their vision of deeper learning and thicken their knowledge of the different traditions in which it exists.

- Finally, the only way to increase the stock of people clamoring for deeper learning is to have people actually experience what it is like to learn deeply. Thus for those who believe in deeper learning, they need to think not only about students, but also parents, legislators, and others who influence the schooling process. Once people have been part of a powerful learning experience, they are much more likely to want to build a whole system full of them.