

Let's Talk about Racism in Schools

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Vitriol and violence connected to race are running high. K–12 classrooms are where we must start to build an equitable, nonracist society.

We all build our own version of the human story and our role in it. We proceed daily, sure that our truth is *the* truth, then someone commits a horrific act of inhumanity that shreds our careful constructs. Then, it happens again, and again—and again, just as it did this past year with the multiple deaths of black men after interactions with police—and then the deaths of police officers.

The normal tools of interpretation and comfort seem to be gone. Who would think that in a caring, thoughtful democracy, we needed a large political movement to remind police officers—and all citizens—of the simple truth that black lives matter? Who would think that when a police officer was asked why he shot an autistic man's caretaker—who was lying with his hands in the air asking officers not to shoot—he'd answer, "I don't know" (Rabin, 2016)?

The violence among U.S. residents of different colors, cultures, religions, and political groups has heated to new levels. Social media may have exacerbated the divisive rhetoric and fanned the flames of hatred more than in past decades, but the intense distrust and contempt, and the inability to resolve these feelings in a civil manner, didn't start with social media. They are the new normal for many.

Rather than give in to the helplessness we feel to stop racism and our collective, civic hemorrhage, every institution must examine its own role in perpetuating (inadvertently and advertently) racist thinking and policies. We can't truly create equal opportunities for all until our institutions take specific actions to end that thinking and those policies. And ground zero for an equitable, nonracist society is the K–12 classroom.

Before we consider recent examples of racism and how it affects all Americans, let's be clear: No one is born racist. Racism is learned. Just as important, racism is not insurmountable.

What We're Up Against

In response to a recent Pew Research Center report that showed white and black Americans aren't on the same page about issues of poverty and racism, blogger Rob Wile (2016) noted, "While most black people think that higher levels of poverty and lower levels of economic mobility in their communities are the fault of America's legacy of systematic racism and under-investment, more white people are content to blame black people themselves."

Five years ago, I was giving a day-long presentation to a group of teachers in the United States. During a morning break, I overheard one woman say to another, "When we get that darkie out of the White House, we'll get this country back the way it should be." The other woman replied, "You got that right."

Refusal to respect other cultures isn't confined to interactions between blacks and whites. On commercial flights, passengers dressed in Muslim clothing who are texting on their phones have been asked to leave the plane because they are making other passengers uncomfortable. And some of my Hispanic students have told me their parents have been shadowed by security personnel as they shop at stores.

Imagine if, at a dinner celebrating local Cub Scouts and their achievements, the adult leader asked everyone to bow his or her head for a word of prayer before the meal. Then he prayed into the microphone, "Praise and glory be to You, O Allah. There is no God but You. Praise be to God, Lord of the Universe, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful!" If this happened in most American Cub Scout packs, people of Christian, Jewish, and other faiths or no faiths would be offended that they were forced to bow their heads and listen to something foreign to their beliefs.

My family experienced something similar at a Cub Scout dinner. The pre-dinner prayer was full of Christian references like, "Through the one and only God, Jesus, our guiding savior, we are redeemed and made whole." This was in a diverse area near Washington, D.C., with a Scout pack full of Muslims, Jews, and people of other faiths as well as Christians. Imagine those non-Christian families' reactions to such a prayer. I asked the leader if there might be a more inclusive prayer we could offer. She dismissed the concern. As I looked around the room at the faces of many parents and children, I saw the real lesson learned: *You don't belong.*

Not all disrespect and conflict is purely about race. Religious, cultural, and racial differences interweave. Stark differences result in fervent debate and divisiveness among Christians as well as among Muslims and Jews. Racism, however, is among the most insidious and deepest-running challenges of our time.

Moving Beyond Silence

Clearly, Americans must begin talking candidly together about race—starting now. We don't need to justify having focused conversations about racism in schools. I'm bothered by my own silence at times as I witness racism. After I overheard the comment about "that darkie [in] the White House," I didn't confront these women. It wasn't a proud moment; in my silence, there was tacit acceptance of racist thinking.

I'm upset at my silence about racist statements and behaviors by others that I've heard about but not witnessed personally. It might seem that because the incidents are second-hand, I'm absolved from speaking out against them. Yet, how do I reconcile that silence with my belief that each of us is free only if everyone is free? As Nelson Mandela (1995) wrote, "Freedom is indivisible; the chains on any one of my people

were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of my people were the chains on me. ... The oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed" (p. 624). Besides the stunning cruelty of racism, letting it fester serves no one, not even the predominant group. We're in this together. It's ironic, then, that we focus on labeling *differences* among us, particularly whether those differences are negative or positive. For example, if a teacher looks at the students before her at the beginning of the school year, it's likely she will wonder who are going to be the easiest ones to teach. Isn't the one we assume to be easy to teach the student who most reflects our own culture, or the one who looks similar to a student from last year we enjoyed teaching? We're already sorting according to built-in biases. When we wonder who'll be the *hardest* to teach, we often guess the students who don't look like anyone we've taught before. Humans have built-in "other"-isms in order to protect ourselves. We categorize people in terms of ourselves and, in many cases, interpret differences from us in a negative way. (*That music they play in their homes is annoying! Can't they eat less disgusting food?*) We might even think, *How sad. My neighbor who worships at a different church doesn't understand the higher truth.* Or for easy identification, we might resort to caricatures, versions that emphasize one or two attributes we think a cultural group has. (*All Asians are gifted mathematicians. White people who live in trailers are alcoholics.*)

Principles for Brave Conversations

I sometimes question whether white educators can accept that institutionalized racism exists and whether they can do so without succumbing to paralyzing guilt about their complicity in racism's growth or becoming so overwhelmed that they give up. I sometimes question whether black teachers and parents can embrace white teachers and parents who want to do right. Can they accept whites' sincere efforts to work together to end racist practices, even if they stumble or are unintentionally offensive? But we have to try talking with one another, because biases and quick categorizations about people who are different from us are expressions of our limited experiences with them. Such categorizations are a slippery slope into classism and racism. With more experiences with others, we flesh people out in our minds and become comfortable with them. When we spend time with quadriplegics, for instance, we come to see them as individuals first, persons with paralyzed limbs a distant second. People with a hardened stance against LGBTQ rights soften when a member of their family reveals he is homosexual.

Yet talking about racism is uncomfortable. We avoid such conversations in schools because it could stir things up that we're unprepared to handle. We might lose friends or colleagues for a while—or longer. Or we're so afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing or appearing racist that we cripple constructive opportunities to talk about race and resolve conflicts. By approaching one another with good faith and caring, we can ease these fears. As Howard Stevenson (2014) writes,

Students, teachers, parents, and educators must expect, receive, and give affection (nurturing), protection (monitoring), and correction (accountability) while they take risks to become aware of and learn to resolve racial stress and conflict in daily social interactions. Without these ingredients, the risks of racial avoidance will be too great, and the improvement of race relations and racial climates within schools too arduous to complete.

Reviewing and agreeing on the principles below can help us have candid discussions about racism with our students—or among fellow educators.

- *Assume that, at any given moment in the conversation, the other person is doing the best he or she can.* Chances are, it's true.

- *Forgive yourself and others for making mistakes*, including inexact wording, muddled thinking, or unintended use of stereotypes.

- *Suppress hidden agendas* and the urge to preach or politicize.

- *Remain nonaccusatory when you see things differently from another.*

Use phrases like, "It's been my experience that ____," "Tell me more about ____," or "How did faculty at your last school respond to ____?"

- *Seek first to understand*, then to be understood (Covey, 2013).

- *If you disagree with someone, paraphrase that person's point before responding.* It helps him know that his comments were heard and considered.

- *Avoid language that blames* ("If it weren't for white people. ... "They're always speaking Spanish together, so they must not want me around." "You're blind to white privilege.") Blaming thwarts honest conversation.

- *Don't ask anyone to speak for a whole race* if there's only one student or colleague in the group from a particular culture or race.

- *Acknowledge that candid conversation makes us all vulnerable.*

Teachers' inner selves are on view daily by many constituencies—students, parents, administrators, and the general public. They are also subject to self-doubts and high expectations of professionalism. As a result, they may be hesitant to open those vulnerability gates too widely.

- *Avoid associating the quality of a colleague's teaching with exploratory comments offered in conversation about racism.* A peer can be a neophyte in such conversations, but effective in the classroom.

The questions in Figure 1 can help start robust conversations in school communities. As to how to launch these discussions, I don't recommend starting conversations on racism at a large faculty meeting. This often results in side conversations, cross-talking, and "knowing" glances passed among people, and personal buttons may be pushed. In

large gatherings, many voices and perspectives don't get heard (in fact, a few teachers might hijack the conversation with their own agendas). A thoughtful exploration of issues involving racism in the school is better started in groups of no more than six. Build to a larger group experience after conversation skills have developed.

Figure 1. Questions to Start Faculty Discussions About Racism

Does racism exist in our schools? What does it sound or look like?
What would it take to create a truly race-neutral society? Do we want this?
Am I racist? Why, or why not? Am I open to others' critique when it comes to how I relate to other races?
Does the rise of certain groups' influence—Latino, Jewish, white, Muslim, or whatever—mean a decline in other groups' well-being? If people say yes, discuss whether this represent a "zero sum" mindset. Is this a mindset we want to communicate to students?
How can we counter negative stereotypes?
Are we responsible for teaching students and colleagues to recognize and confront racism?
What should we do when we inadvertently do or say something racist?
What do we communicate to the parents of our minority students about our expectations for their children?
How are we battling the student opinion that academic proficiency is inherently white?
Do we have a disproportionate number of administrative referrals for our minority students?

Choose faculty to lead these conversations who are good at making sure each voice is heard and valued. Give these leaders time to brainstorm constructive responses or strategies to diffuse any (intentionally and unintentionally) incendiary comments. If a point becomes particularly contentious, for instance, participants might record their thinking on index cards and pass them to the facilitator to read aloud. Dozens of books and websites on group facilitation provide helpful tips on small-group dynamics. For conversing on racism, I particularly recommend Ali Michael's *Raising Race Questions: Whiteness and Inquiry in Education* (Teachers College Press, 2014) and Howard Stevenson's *Promoting Racial Literacy in Schools: Differences That Make a Difference* (Teachers College Press, 2013).

Informing Our Conversations

To build a climate where such discussions bear fruit, we should immerse students and ourselves in learning experiences that will positively inform conversations about race. Lack of awareness about other races rarely helps a difficult conversation; it leads to misunderstandings, limited sharing, hurt feelings, and eventually, a discussion's demise. Experiences like these will help us sustain difficult interactions—and bring equal opportunity to students from nonmainstream cultures.

- Use fiction and nonfiction that will open students to different worlds, help them see situations from different perspectives, and build empathy.

- Try simulations and role-playing in which students can approximate the perspectives of others, but be sensitive to the fact that some of us can leave the role at the end of the learning experience. Anyone from a minority race or oppressed group can't slip out of the challenges at the end of the day: They live with them 24–7.

- Have your class regularly think about a contentious issue from one prevailing perspective, then give them 20 minutes to argue the same issue from the opposite perspective. Working with partners can help.

- Practice responses to scenarios involving racism. What should a teacher or student do if someone says something that might be perceived as racist? For instance, in a class discussion about the economy of the South during the Civil War, one student blurts out, "I wouldn't mind having slaves around to help me get a lot of work done!" (Stevenson, 2014). A thoughtful teacher might say something like, "Tobey, consider how someone coming from a culture severely traumatized by slave masters would hear your words just now. How would they feel about your comment about slavery? Would you like to rephrase your statement?" By rehearsing successful responses, we can create a picture of ourselves responding to an instance of racism, which increases the likelihood that we will respond.

- Hold students accountable immediately for racist statements and behaviors. You can do so in ways that let the student repair damage: "Terry, I know you're not naturally a racist thinker. Check your statement again: Is there anything there that could be construed as racist?" If a student consistently makes racially insensitive comments and needs a nonhumiliating boost in executive function skills—which is where much of the filtering of impulsive, inappropriate comments resides—you might videotape class discussions from time to time. In a private moment away from classmates, cue up the video to a place showing inappropriate comments from this student and ask him or her, "What did you say here? Look at the body language, faces, and responses from your classmates. Did you read the situation correctly? How could you have made a completely different comment that would demonstrate respect for people of color?"

- Talk to students about what you believe about race and equity.

Successful teachers aren't afraid of teaching a community's values; they are not indifferent. It's important to model for students a vision of adults standing up for what they think is morally right. With racism, there is little ambiguity; intentional or unintentional discrimination against a person or group based on race or culture is against the law.

- Teach skills of debate and civil discourse, using materials from [Teaching Tolerance](#), the [National Speech and Debate Association](#), and the [National Institute for Civil Discourse](#).

- Don't just skim information on the Civil Rights movement and its leaders, and don't limit its study to Black History Month. Give it full attention throughout the school year. Study more than just the struggles of black Americans. Civil Rights isn't just about equitable treatment for one group.

- Share news stories that surface racism in the local community and in national politics. Have students investigate school or community racism, if appropriate.

- Empower students to do something about racism in the media (and social media) when they see it, such as writing letters, making presentations, or analyzing a racist's arguments.

- Expose students to artworks and contributions by many different cultures and races and let them respond personally to those artifacts.

- Teach students and teachers to recognize and control micro-aggressions—the small, seemingly nonracist things people do, say, and think that are hurtful and may betray unconscious racism or bias. Examples include: avoiding eye contact with students outside our culture; telling a student her math work is excellent for a student who comes from such a poor background; demeaning service industry jobs or any job perceived as being done primarily by minorities ("If you don't study, you might wind up as a taxi driver"); and using language like saying black youths "rioted and turned violent," whereas white youths "protested unfair treatment."

- Have students write personal reflections about racial tension. Discuss how much people filter their language in trying to say it just the right way.

Securing a Nonracist Future

Part of our job as educators is to secure a nonracist future, so our response to racism in our schools must be clear and compassionate. Settling for indifference exacerbates the problem. And we can't afford to leave anyone out of this conversation. For instance, I'm a white male, so some people might think, *How could he possibly understand this enough to be helpful?* Some might even dismiss my ideas because of my race alone. Think about that idea—that because of my race, I have nothing of value to add to the

community discussion on racism—and you'll see it's misguided. Every one of us is touched by racism. We all have a stake in positive race relations. A conversation needs only two people. Let's each identify, today, one person on our faculty with whom we're willing to initiate a conversation on racism, regardless of the make-up of our student body or faculty. Whole futures are at stake—ours. Together, we are powerful.

Great Books to Inform Conversations on Racism

- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (Spiegel & Grau, 2015)
- *Raising Race Questions: Whiteness and Inquiry in Education* by Ali Michael (Teachers College Press, 2014)
- *Scarcity: The New Science of Having Less and How It Defines Our Lives* by Sendhil Mullainathan (Picador, 2014)
- *Dream Makers, Dream Breakers: The World of Justice Thurgood Marshall* by Carl T. Rowan (Back Bay Books, 1993)
- *What's Race Got to Do with It? How Current School Reform Policy Maintains Racial and Economic Inequity* edited by Edwin Mayorga and Bree Picower (Peter Lang Publishers, 2015)
- *Reading for Their Life: (Re)Building the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males* by Alfred W. Tatum (Heinemann, 2009)

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Teaching Along the Way (2013) and *Summarization in Any Subject* (ASCD, 2004).
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