CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILY CONSORTIUM

Healing Racism- The Time To Act Is Now

Emmanuel Dolo, Ph.D.
Consortium Connections, Summer 2009

Growing numbers of public school students come from racial minority groups. As students of color continue to "fall farther and farther behind" academically, race is increasingly at the epicenter of policy debates on the achievement gap between minority and White students. The achievement gap manifests in the form of drop out rates, the number of students who take placement exams, the number of students enrolled in gifted, international baccalaureate, and/or advanced placement classes, as well as admission to college, graduate or professional institutions. The racial divide is perhaps the locus of the utmost debate, even strife, in some cases when it comes to evolving an equity-based educational policy in the United States.

Yet still, it is hard to pinpoint with certainty that racism is the primary cause of the achievement gap. Even for students of color who might be the targets of perceived or real racist actions, it is difficult to isolate malicious intent from lack of knowledge about culturally-appropriate educational systems and instructional practices as the root cause of the achievement gap. Hard to dispute, though, is a common perception of students of color as "unintelligent and unmotivated," which disregards the oppressive circumstances of their lives. Racially stereotypical depictions are the prisms through which nearly all social interactions between Caucasians and people of color are filtered. It is hard to think that racism, therefore, is not "deployed and reproduced" across the social landscape–schools and the administrators, teachers, and staff who work within them, included.

Who among us might want to deny that structural factors, in part, account for the underperformance of students of color? Who might want to deny that such an underestimation of the power of societal factors contributes to the inability for some to recognize racism as an existential threat to academic achievement among students of color? Who might want to deny that some White teachers are fearful of mounting a vigorous response against the "low expectation trap" because it reinforces strongly held negative views of students of color? What is not in dispute is that the achievement gap is a complex social problem, and it cannot be blamed on any one contributing factor.

There is not a better time than now, when an urgent need exists, for society to rid itself of individual and collective racial prejudices. There has never been a better time to invest in the future of students of color. Why? Demographic changes have poised people of color to be the majority workforce in the near future. And if the impetus for abandoning racial prejudice and adequately investing in the capacities of

students of color is not purely economic, another motivation might be that students of color will have a significant ability to impact and shape the quality of life for us all in retirement. As the future majority workforce, the kinds of employment students of color are prepared to attain, and the salaries they will earn, should greatly influence the livelihoods of the next retiring generation. With publicly funded safety nets—Medicare and Social Security—facing threats to being sustained, we ought to be vigilant in ensuring that the future majority workforce receives quality education. But if the widening achievement gaps between students of color and their White peers remain, and the poor graduation or low college attendance rates prevail, the future of the US is in peril.

So what are some of the specific ways that societal racism impacts the school experience and success of children of color?

Children spend their early years of development largely within the context of cultural communities and learning the values and operating "norms" of their culture. When they start school, they enter a world designed and organized by the White culture, they don't see their race or ethnicity represented very much in the schools they attend (a great majority of the teachers are White; Cross, 2003) or in the curricula they use. Often put in the position of having to interpret the school environment in the context of their own cultural experience, students of color face rules and expectations that may be based on a value system that is very different from their own cultural identity. This interpretive process puts a very complex layer between students of color and their learning environment that students of the majority culture do not experience.

The cultural community, and specifically parents of color, often express frustration over sending their children to schools where they know their cultural identity will be ignored, at best, and negated or even squelched, at worst.

Teachers are challenged by the differing backgrounds, value systems, needs, and languages represented in their classrooms. A middle-age White teacher made the following observation during a presentation in an outer-ring suburb of Minnesota.

"We were trained to teach a homogenous group of White students, and have not yet been trained and equipped to adequately teach the students of color in our classes."

This teacher could have been acknowledging that her practice is not informed by the life experience of oppression that students of color face in their daily lives—a consequence of conscious or unconscious racist conditioning. But she is also reflecting on inadequate preparation of teachers for the increasingly diverse student populations in which teachers find themselves.

Racism, like any social behavior, is learned and can be unlearned. As a society immersed in race consciousness, the "enactment, expression, legitimation, and acquisition" of racism occurs in our everyday life, and school is not an exception. Our education process is a discourse that "expresses and confirms" White dominance, both in subtle and blatant ways. American society, specifically the education sub-sector, must recognize and seek ways to surmount the racist conditioning of our education processes, if there is any hope of achieving educational equity. The equity effects of our sporadic integration and inclusion efforts will not be realized as long as education is knotted with racism in the form of low expectations and stereotypes about students of color, and a lack of understanding of cultural identity as a part of students' educational experience.

Integration and inclusion efforts need to be institutionalized to uproot the tentacles of institutionalized racism. Racism will continue to trigger a backlash from students of color in the form of self-inflicted rejection and/or hostility toward educators and systems that they deem racist, while impairing themselves academically and developmentally. Students and parents of color find themselves embroiled in a social and distributive justice struggle, asserting their rights to the same quality of education and opportunities being received by their White counterparts. Where society fails to recognize and deal with the inherent racist conditioning of the larger society, sustainable efforts to close the achievement gap will be virtually impossible.

White colleagues have argued that racism is not a major factor in determining the achievement gap by cloaking their arguments in the rather vague sentiment: "how far we have come." Unless society abandons the clichéd perceptions of minority students spawned by racism, and reproduced by the media, law enforcement, criminal justice, and other institutions of governance, we face considerable difficulties healing from racism as a society.

There is a long tradition of White people being allies for social and distributive justice. Therefore, this aspiration is rooted in reality. Society and educational leadership and the educational workforce need to be prepared to work effectively with an increasingly diverse student population (Howard, 2006). Equally so, parents and caregivers of color should make certain that students of color are fixated on succeeding in school (Price, 2002).

SELECTED READINGS

Cross, Berverly. (2003). Learning or unlearning racism: Transferring teacher education curriculum to classroom practice. Theory Into Practice, vol.42, no.3. (Summer), pp. 203-209.

Howard, Gary. (2006).We can't teach what we don't know: White teachers, multiracial schools. Teacher's College Press: New York, New York.

Kivel, Paul. (2002).Uprooting racism: How White people can work for racial justice. New Society Publishers: Gabriola Island, BC.

Price, Hugh. (2002). Achievement matters: Getting your child the best education possible. Kensington Publishing Corp: New York, New York.

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA | EXTENSION