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Learning to Talk about Race and Implicit Bias in Historically White Districts: Some Guidance for Educators

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By Danielle Greene and Ann Jaquith

Why is learning to talk about race and implicit bias in a school district that historically served and/or presently serves a predominantly white student population important? We live in an increasingly multicultural society where every child deserves an equitable education—one that is without bias and harmful practices. Therefore, no matter what the student population of color is in a school, the education of each student matters equally. A better understanding of the needs of each student is critical. Students of minority racial backgrounds may have different challenges than those who make up the majority, sometimes resulting from the actions of individuals or the overall school climate and culture. Because American society is becoming more diverse—even while some of our school districts are becoming less diverse—it is increasingly important that we educators recognize our racial and cultural biases, examine them, and make sure that the content of our instruction and instructional practices meet the needs of every student. Researchers who study the needs of diverse students in schools advise: "Teachers must create a classroom culture where students, regardless of their cultural and linguistic background, are welcomed and supported and provided with the best opportunity to learn."[1] Dorothy Steele and Becki Cohn-Vargas further specify the need to create classrooms that "cultivate a sense of identity safety in students," which they define as "a sense of freedom from stereotypes linking social identity to academic performance."[2] Many historically white school districts, however, are underprepared to meet the needs of their diverse student bodies.[3] Others adopt colorblind ideologies, which are attempts not to see racial or ethnic differences out of a sense of equality but in fact such practices "can often magnify the impact of differences" and cause harm.[4] For instance, Steele and Cohen-Vargas explain that "by not paying *particular* attention to who each student is and by failing to address each student's

particular experiences and interests, teachers unintentionally convey that what these students know and can do, and how they feel, does not matter."[5]

In our experience as educators and researchers (one of us is white and the other Black),[6] discussions of race, bias, prejudice, and racism are rare in historically white spaces. What do we mean by racism? We use David Wellman's definition of racism—"a system of advantage based on race"—for the same reasons Beverly Tatum does in her book, *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race*.[7] Tatum explains:

> This definition of racism is useful because it allows us to see that racism, like other forms of oppression, is not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice but a *system* involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals.[8]

When the topics of racism, race, or bias are broached, white people often seem to feel uncomfortable and uncertain about how to talk about these issues. This uncertainty is not surprising since many white people, in particular, are unaccustomed to talking about these topics.[9] Furthermore, their level of discomfort may increase if they have never before considered the benefits of being white or the way in which racism (e.g., systems of advantage based on race) benefits them.[10] Therefore, it is not surprising that white people tend to avoid this topic. However, the ability to talk about race, bias, and inequity is vital for educators who strive to see their own practices more clearly and who want to make the changes necessary for school cultures to become more welcoming, accessible, and educative environments for all of our children who come to school.

WHY AN EDUCATORS' GUIDE?

The idea for this educators' guide grew out of a collaboration between a group of educators in a small, affluent, and historically white suburban school district and a team of researchers at the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE). The creation of the Do Right For Kids group, which began as a way for the district to talk about what it was

learning about gaps of achievement between its own student groups, evolved into a group committed to developing cultures of learning in its schools that are more equitable and just, so as to assure the positive social, emotional, academic, physical, and artistic growth of all of its students. SCOPE researchers were invited to become participant observers of this group, which met four times during the 2017-2018 school year. During our observations, we noticed instances where a group member would make a comment—about socio-economically disadvantaged students, English language learners, race, racism, or instances of unconscious bias—often spurred by the readings which the group was doing that tackled matters of educational inequity. These comments, which seemed to take some degree of courage to offer, were silently acknowledged but rarely responded to directly or considered out loud by other group members. The lack of explicit engagement with these comments may have inhibited conversations from ever blooming into courageous and pointed discussions about (in)equity within the district. Given the nearly all white racial make-up of the Do Right For Kids group, SCOPE researchers wondered if part of the reason comments about race, racism, and unconscious bias were not responded to may have stemmed from race-related anxieties. Well-intentioned desires to adopt colorblind ideologies and not be viewed as racist can prevent deeper engagement with many root causes of educational inequity.[11]

When we shared our observation with the Do Right For Kids members, they expressed interest in developing their own capacity to engage in more direct conversations about race, unconscious bias, and recognizing practices in their schools that may favor some groups over others. This group's ambition of moving toward actionable steps to identify and dismantle educational inequity within the district still remains a goal. The Do Right For Kids' goal and the discomfort that we observed associated with openly discussing and tackling issues related to race, unconscious bias, and socio-economic inequities in the school district inspired the creation of this document.

This guidance document is intended to provide a resource to the teachers, administrators, and staff of the participating district who want to become more able to talk about race and unconscious bias in order to make changes in their workplace so that their

school community can become a place where each student and family—regardless of race, language spoken, or socio-economic status—feels a sense of belonging to the community and experiences equitable opportunities for learning. Already, the guide has sparked conversation within this district. Likewise, it is our hope that this guide can also serve as a resource for other historically white school districts that are interested in addressing similar persistent inequities facing their diverse student populations. As students of color begin to make up larger segments of society and populations in suburban schools, considerations about how minority racial groups can be taught equitably, given their personal and cultural backgrounds, must be incorporated in intentional ways into each district's educational approach.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES

CAN WE TALK ABOUT RACE AND RACISM?

Near the completion of the Do Right For Kids' scheduled meetings for 2017-18, the group began to explore the question of whether talking about race and racism was a safe and relevant topic to discuss in relation to the students in the district. During the group's final meeting for the school year, one group member expressed the following sentiment:

> *"If someone calls you a racist, you should receive it as a gift—so long as you use it as an opportunity to be grateful that people are being communicative and attempting to get you to reflect on how you can be better. It's okay to be called a racist. Use that moment to fix the problem, not to focus on your own hurt feelings."*

This statement was part of a larger conversation, facilitated by SCOPE researchers with the aim of helping the Do Right For Kids group move away from solitary, courageous comments and toward courageous conversations. It was sparked by an incident where a white teacher felt a parent of color was implying that (s)he was racist. As a result of the incident and the following commentary, the Do Right For Kids group began to unpack how and why being called racist, explicitly or implicitly, could be considered a gift.

IS BEING CALLED RACIST A GIFT?

After lengthy conversation and efforts to consider multiple perspectives on the topic, the Do Right For Kids group came to the conclusion that being called a "racist" *can* be a gift. Being called racist as an educator provides an important opportunity to see one's own actions and words through someone else's eyes and life experiences. It is an opportunity to reflect on, re-evaluate, and reset words, policies, and actions that are interpreted as harmful or otherwise not in the best interest of marginalized student groups.

> *"What we know is that inequitable, racialized outcomes do not require racist actors.*
> *A person can be committed to the care, well-being, and educational progress of a*
> *child and still, unconsciously, participate in systemic oppression."[12]*

Not all readers of this guide, white or non-white, may have had the experience of being called racist. However, it is worth considering, questioning, and investigating why that label may *not* have been ascribed to you. Take a moment to reflect. As an educator, what are the relationships and/or power dynamics between you and your students and/or parents who are not of the same racial and ethnic background as you? Might they have experienced your words, actions, or policies as racially biased? Would people of a different racial/ethnic background than you feel safe and supported to assert their feelings of frustration, hurt, anger, or disgruntlement to you? What sort of relationships do you have, if any, with teachers who are not of your own race? It is important to realize that the term "not racist" is not a label you can self-ascribe. Rather, this label is determined by others' perceptions of you.

Bias. Unconscious bias. Injustice. Inequality. Consider how you may have been complicit in inequity. Most people find it takes extreme courage to acknowledge personal biases, not only to oneself, but also to those around you, as well as to make change. (For some ideas on how to do so, see *Some Actions You Can Take*, pp. 7-9.) Nevertheless, our personal discomfort should not supersede equitable outcomes for the children in our classrooms, schools, and districts.

DOES THE RACE OF THE TEACHER MATTER?

Research shows that strong student connectedness to school is associated with greater academic achievement and social outcomes for all students.[13] Scholars who study student connectedness, which they define as a willingness to participate in the school curriculum and the ability to form relational bonds with adults, found that Hispanic and African American students display lower levels of attachment in racially diverse but majority white schools.[14] As such, having a teacher of the same race can help students feel more connected to school. This is one reason why research has shown that students of color often perform better when taught by teachers of color.[15] It is important for students to have some teachers who are of the same race and ethnicity as they are and to have some teachers of a different race.

Nationally, 82% of public-school teachers are white, but in the suburbs, despite the increase of students of color, the white teacher workforce is five percentage points higher (87%) than the national average.[16] Overall, California has a more diverse teacher workforce than the national average. According to data available from the 2016-2017 school year, 33% of all California public school teachers (90,620 out of 274,276) identified as a race other than white, non-Hispanic. However, in the same school year, 76% of all California public school students identified as a race other than white, non-Hispanic.[17] This means there are more than fifty times as many students of color in our schools than there are teachers of color. In low-poverty schools, the disproportion between teachers of color and students of color is even greater. Results from a 2011-12 national sample of teachers working in low-poverty schools found on average 91% of the teachers were white, 4% were Hispanic, 2.3% were Black, and 1.3% were Asian.[18] This discrepancy between the numbers of teachers of color and students of color can negatively affect the schooling experiences of all students, and especially our students of color.

Studies assert that, although instructors purport enthusiasm about increases in student racial diversity in majority white schools, white teachers often struggle to connect with racially diverse students and families—feeling that they and their colleagues are less able to meet the needs of non-white students.[19] Likewise, beliefs that students of color and/or low-income

students lack the preparation of their higher-income and/or white peers can lead to discrepancies in the approaches teachers take when giving students recommendations, when grading subjectively, and when enrolling students in advanced classes (where students of color are often underrepresented).[20] Students of color are also more likely to be identified as needing special education services; yet, when students of color attend schools that have higher percentages of teachers of color, they are more likely to be recognized as gifted or talented.[21]

Unconscious Bias

Practices that advantage some students and disadvantage others can be the result of unconscious bias. Despite the unintentional nature of personal prejudices or biases, the topic of race in American culture is considered a taboo subject for public discussion—especially in white communities.[22] Compounding this issue is the normalization of whiteness within American society. Reportedly, three out of four white people in the United States do not maintain a *close* friendship with at least one non-white person and are often never required to navigate spaces where they are in the minority.[23] In contrast, people of color often unavoidably find themselves in majority white environments as a circumstance of their existences.[24] Infrequent close contact between whites and people of different racial and, often, linguistic backgrounds allows stereotypes to persist. This separation among races also means that many white people never have to confront their personal biases or work to dismantle them.

The Results of Unconscious Bias

As a result, many instructors and administrators carry racial and linguistic misconceptions with them to work. Particularly in communities with little diversity, many educators feel that it is in the best interest of their students to adopt colorblind policies in classrooms and schools in order to maintain a "race-neutral" environment. There is no such thing as "race neutral." Prejudice, bias, privilege, and oppression exist, regardless of attempts to ignore them or feign their inexistence. All policies can have inherent racial implications that affect particular populations or sub-populations within the larger group in a variety of ways. Within the education system, adhering to the misconception that schools are and should be race neutral can be particularly damaging. *Research has found that educators who attempt to*

avoid or evade race unwittingly further exacerbate opportunity gaps by decreasing and/or discouraging opportunities for culturally relevant teaching and learning.[25] The practice of avoiding race, which exacerbates opportunity gaps, coupled with trust in colorblind policies can lead presumably, well-meaning white individuals to assume that people of color are inferior. If people of color continue to fail under similar treatment that has "no racially motivated intent," then the failure gets attributed to the people of color; the underlying assumption that racial discrimination does not exist is never (or rarely) challenged by whites.[26] This reasoning is supported by findings that claim white educators generally judge students of color as less academically oriented than their white counterparts.[27]

So, the question remains: Whether or not you, personally, have been called racist, how can personal biases, prejudices, and complicity with racist behaviors and/or racism be recognized, discussed, examined, and deconstructed by educators who want to create equitable environments for all students?

TAKING ACTION

ACTIONS TO TAKE TO DEEPEN AWARENESS OF ONE'S OWN UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

This section offers some ideas for individual and collective action. It is particularly addressed to white educators who make up the majority of the teaching workforce (e.g., 82% nationally, 87% suburban, and 91% low-poverty schools) in the United States. White teachers, administrators, and schools with majority white student populations who seek to identify and interrogate their biases with the goal of dismantling inequitable and discriminatory policies, practices, and behaviors should understand that it is healthy to have a positive sense of membership in one's own racial group—so long as one's racial identity is not based on an assumed superiority.[28] Despite often feeling uncomfortable talking about race, bias, and prejudice, or assuming that race is not a significant part of one's own identity, it is natural for all people to feel as though they are members of particular racial groups.

Interrogate Racial Identity

Likewise, just as other American racial groups go through different stages of identity development as they progress toward acquiring a positive relationship with how they are perceived and identified racially in society, so do American whites.[29] Developing one's own sense of racial identity is a process. Dr. Janet Helms, a research psychologist at Boston College, developed a six-stage model that describes the personal progression of American whites as they move toward developing a positive, non-racist white racial identity:

1. *Contact* – This stage is characterized by the absence of awareness of cultural and institutional racism and of one's own white privilege. Often associated with "colorblind" ideologies, this stage may be characterized by naïve curiosity about or fear of people of color, based upon stereotypes learned from friends, family, or the media.

2. *Disintegration* – Increased interactions with non-whites and new life experiences and/or information that challenge prior conceptions of race, racism, privilege, and bias marks this stage. People in this stage are often plagued by emotions such as sadness, shame, anger, and/or guilt. Reactions to those feelings can vary. When those emotions are not positively channeled or are met with opposition from other white people who are unwilling to notice race, they can lead to more, intensively negative feelings. The societal pressure to accept the status quo may lead to the next stage.

3. *Reintegration* – Beginning to process new ideologies about racism, prejudice, and bias can lead to anxiety about becoming isolated from other whites who are unable or unwilling to accept those new philosophies. Likewise, feelings of shame and guilt about the state of race relations can intensify into denial and anger directed toward people of color. Maintaining civil relationships with other white people becomes more important than confronting instances of inequality or biased comments/behaviors that are observed. It is relatively easy for white people to become stuck in this stage of development, especially if avoidance of people of color

is possible. A catalyst for continued self-examination leads individuals to the next stage.

4. *Pseudo-Independent* – Information-seeking often marks the onset of this state. Individuals in this stage abandon beliefs of white superiority, but may still behave in ways that unintentionally perpetuate the system. This stage is characterized by an understanding that racism and privilege function as the results of unfair systems of advantage/disadvantage; people in this stage may begin to prioritize dismantling inequity over preventing social isolation from other whites. Relationships with non-white people are possibly actively sought out, leading to continued "cross-racial interactions" from which the person can continue to learn about race and unlearn racism.

5. *Immersion/Emersion* – Attempts to re-examine and re-define their personal understandings of how to use their whiteness to eradicate racism or enact anti-racist change are indicative of this stage. Concern and understanding is expressed for other white people who are in other stages, like *contact* and *disintegration*, and more information is sought after about other prominent white allies as possible role models.

6. *Autonomy* – The final stage is the internalization of a positive white racial identity and a lived commitment to anti-racist activity, ongoing self-examination, and increased interpersonal effectiveness in multiracial settings.[30]

For white educators attempting to create equitable school environments for all students, evaluating where one sits on Helms' white racial identity development model is an important, initial step toward achieving equity. Naturally, people will find themselves at various stages of Helms' model, with very few legitimately sitting in the Autonomy stage—and that is okay. What is most important is not where American whites sit in relation to Helms' personal progression model, but the work they are doing toward countering racism, acknowledging privilege, and achieving a positive white racial identity.

Talking about Race and Racism

While intrapersonal self-assessment is important, so too is moving toward interpersonal conversations. Talking about race, racism, prejudice, and bias can be a particularly taboo and uncomfortable topic. However, as educators, we have a responsibility to protect children. Children of marginalized backgrounds need us to have those uncomfortable conversations, regardless of how uncomfortable or painful they can be—and they need these conversations to happen sooner rather than later. Collectively, it is constructive to benefit from others' knowledge about how to proceed in creating equitable schools. Recognizing the discomfort experienced by many people when talking about race, Dr. Beverly Tatum, a psychologist, professor, and the author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, developed a series of working assumptions that are helpful to keep in mind when approaching discussions of inequity, oppression, race, and racism. They are:

1. It is virtually impossible to live in contemporary society in the United States and not be exposed to some manifestation of racism. Racism leads to misinformation about groups.
2. Prejudice and racism are different concepts with similar roots but should be treated as distinguishable from one another. Exposure to cultural stereotypes (even positive ones) has created prejudices in us and can have negative effects.
3. In US society, there is a system of advantage, and it operates to benefit whites as a group. However, while all forms of oppression impact various groups differently, privilege hurts members of advantaged groups as well as those targeted by racism.
4. We all have a responsibility to identify and interrupt cycles of oppression.
5. Change, both individual and institutional, is possible.[31]

Adopting these assumptions can help all people talk about race and racism more openly and to listen to others' perspectives and experiences.

A lack of willingness to engage in racial self-assessment and communal conversations regarding racial inequity in schools can leave the implicit biases of white and non-white

teachers unaddressed; such biases may lead to "deficit model mentality" assumptions about the existing knowledge base and/or learning capabilities of children of color. Instead of valuing the cultural, linguistic, individual, and communal knowledge that students of color bring into the classroom and weaving this knowledge into the fabric of the class, a deficit perspective fails to recognize or value the knowledge that students of color bring into the classroom. Deficit models presume that the knowledge students of color have is either limited, missing, and/or flawed and, therefore, is something to overcome.[32] Holding a deficit model mentality demands adherence to the dominant culture; in the case of diversifying schools, teachers might only legitimize mainstream white norms within the context of schooling.[33] For instance, white teachers might impress upon their students that there is value in explicitly challenging the ideas of adults, where that behavior may be considered disrespectful by some cultures.

WHAT ARE POSSIBLE WAYS TO DISRUPT INEQUITY IN SCHOOLS?

Interrogating personal biases and prejudices are important steps toward providing equitable learning experiences for all students of all backgrounds. As previously discussed, there is no time when one's internal examination is considered "finished," but there is a point during the self-examination process when interrogation is no longer enough and action is needed. We suggest below some first steps that may provide reasonable and productive places to start:

1. Students need to feel a sense of social and emotional belonging and connectedness to school in order for them to learn, grow, and develop to their full potential. Because this need is foundational, a first step is to cultivate positive relationships with each student and among the students. In an important and practical book written for educators about how to create a sense of belonging and safety for students in classroom, Dorothy Steele and Becki Cohn-Vargas describe specific actions that educators can take to develop warm and welcoming spaces for students of diverse backgrounds. They suggest a good starting place is a warm greeting to each student every morning, one that shows each student that you are glad the student is there, and expressing sincere interest in how things are going for every

student. These actions may seem simple but, as described in their text, are important foundational steps in developing classroom spaces where every student's identity is valued and where students are able to feel safe.[34]

2. Create other comfortable spaces in your school for students who are of minority backgrounds. These spaces, referred to as "ethnic enclaves" in the research literature, offer spaces of comfort and belonging.[35] These enclaves are dedicated, free-flowing instructional spaces (i.e. a section of the library, a counselor's office, a teacher's classroom, etc.) run by culturally flexible teachers where students of the same or similar ethnic/racial backgrounds meet to foster ethnic pride as a way of encouraging instrumental and emotional support for academic success.[36] Such enclaves could be a designated space where these students eat, socialize, discuss frustrations, and/or complete homework together in the company of an adult who the students perceive as an ally. Ideally, the minority group would be in the majority and a person of color (who shares the same cultural identity as those students for whom the enclave is created) would be responsible for the space. By establishing ethnic enclaves, schools can promote multiculturalism in an environment that celebrates, values, and preserves students' heritage as a way of guarding against low student attachment and/or engagement in school as a result of the stressors associated with attending a school with little diversity.[37]

3. At the institutional level, many historically white districts need to increase their recruitment, hiring, and retention of teachers of color. In order to properly address the strengths, interests, and needs of students of various backgrounds, recruiting and retaining a diverse staff shows commitment to valuing out-group (or non-racially dominant) perspectives and personal experiences. Ultimately, the race of teachers matters in relation to student outcomes. For teachers of color, particularly Black or Hispanic teachers, who can struggle with workplace discrimination associated with hiring practices in many low-poverty schools, increasing the proportion of teachers of color in the workforce also matters.[38]

We also need to understand what the multiple barriers are to hiring teachers of color in low-poverty, predominately white districts and to make efforts to dismantle these barriers once they are identified. For example, recruitment efforts may need to be re-examined to determine whether they are reaching candidates of color. Actively increasing recruitment within credentialing graduate programs that historically graduate high numbers of teachers of color by creating partnerships with minority-serving institutions and expanding the interview process to include long-distance candidates (via video interviews) may bring a larger pool of diverse and qualified candidates to a district. Likewise, making sincere efforts to retain teachers of color once hired is also an excellent recruitment tool for new candidates of color, who may be unsure about whether they would be welcomed by the district.

Another approach to disrupt institutional inequities might be to intentionally introduce and embed culturally relevant or sustaining pedagogies in the teaching practices of a predominately white workforce. Culturally relevant or sustaining pedagogies emerged as the result of decades of activist-related educational research conducted by scholars of color who vigorously sought to protect, advance, and encourage children of color in public classrooms.[39] Culturally relevant teaching centers on the understanding that students must be taught in a way that strives to preserve their cultural integrity while promoting academic success and developing a critical consciousness that challenges the existing societal state of affairs.[40] Likewise, culturally sustaining pedagogy, an ideological extension of culturally relevant teaching, requires instructional practice(s) that "seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling."[41] Ultimately, both culturally sustaining and culturally responsive pedagogies adhere to the understanding that students are knowledge producers who must have *what they know and have experienced* acknowledged, valued, and incorporated into the classroom.[42]

Schools and districts can examine who is invited to participate in decisions about hiring, curriculum, and teaching, as well as how equity-focused the decision-making process is. Increasing parental involvement in school processes, so that parents who represent the most vulnerable students are well represented, can be a powerful start to disrupting inequitable practices, especially if schools can reconstitute their expectations of what "good" parental engagement looks like. This reorientation will mean reimagining what positive parental involvement looks like outside of the norms of whiteness and Westernization.[43] Noticing how teachers and administrators in schools perceive their relationships with all the communities and families the district serves is important because those perceptions influence the level of positive community and familial support.

4. Methods that introduce instructional leaders to Janet Helms' white identity racial model—such as professional development for in-service teachers and revamped curriculum for pre-service teachers, for instance—as well as to statistics about how non-white children fare academically and personally in majority white classrooms, could be important initial steps toward making culturally relevant teaching possible in historically and/or majority white districts.[44]

School leaders have a significant role to play in transforming schools and classrooms. Administrators and other educational leaders must set the tone and lead the way by encouraging and implementing change throughout their schools. If districts are going to successfully teach their new (or continuing) students of color, adults in schools must understand that new structures and procedures are needed to increase minority students' sense of belonging and to improve their academic outcomes. While difficult, examining our own unconscious biases better prepares us to learn from one another and collectively strive to make our classrooms and schools places where every member of the community is valued, belongs, and has opportunities to achieve a better life. All students and families must be made to feel comfortable, wanted, and affirmed so that they can and will share their own knowledge

with their school communities, as a way of fully participating in creating and sustaining equitable educational practices and experiences.

ENDNOTES

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[6] Here, the authors make an intentional choice to capitalize the first letter in the word Black, but not in white, because of an ideological stance that "white" functions as a descriptor of un-markedness in the American context. Individuals who identify as "white" do so, consciously or unconsciously, as a replacement for a specific ethnic identity (i.e., white rather than Nordic). The descriptor "white" is used to demarcate a broadly drawn line between white and "non-white," neither of which are capitalized. While "Black", like its often-coupled counterpart, "African-American," is intended to designate ethnicity and, therefore, is capitalized.

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