

The Schools Can Overcome Racism

DELMO DELLA-DORA*

IN OUR country, *every school* is the best place to work on overcoming racism, whether the school is all-white, racially mixed, or all-black. *Every* educator is in a position to **make a real difference**. *Now* is the best of all times to work on it. **One** reason for this is that teachers and other staff members are in contact with youngsters for a longer portion of most days than anyone else—including parents. Equally important, maybe **more** so, schools are quite likely the single **most important cause and source of racism** which young people experience in our nation.

Some will object to that last statement. Isn't that "simplistic labeling" or ". . . an unfair and exaggerated blanket indictment of schools generally"? Others already accept the validity of the generalization and say, "It's true, but what can any one person or a few people do? It's a societal phenomenon and too big for me." The fact is that every one of us is an active participant in racist practices daily, usually unintentionally and unconsciously. It is also a fact that each of us is the only one we can count on to change racist behaviors in the ways desired.

Racism in the Society

If you're still saying "Who? Me a racist?," consider this. Schools could be racist in nature without having a single staff

member who harbors racial prejudice or commits racially discriminatory acts. (That is unlikely, but possible.) Racism, prejudice, and discrimination are related but different. Racial prejudice means to prejudge people on the basis of their race and, usually, to feel that one race is inferior to others. Racial discrimination is an act of behaving differently toward people based on their race and reflects the feeling of prejudice.

On the other hand, racism in America is a word which describes prevailing practices in our society and its major institutions. Racial prejudice and discrimination have now become ingrained into the everyday practices and operations of all our major societal institutions. After 350 years of institutionalized racism, most white people and many black people are not consciously aware of the racism which pervades almost every waking moment. The most unaware seem to be whites in all-white communities or schools, particularly those who say, "Of course, we don't have that problem here" (meaning there are no other races present in the school or community) or who refer to "your" problems when referring to racially mixed communities. There are still some who even talk about racial problems as "the Negro problem."

The fact is that the curse of racism is

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there most of all, in the ever increasing number of all-white schools. Further, our racial problems in this country are primarily a "white problem," because white people are in power everywhere that counts, and it is *their* institutions which affect black, yellow, brown, Chicano, American Indian—and whites themselves—adversely.

For a more complete description of the nature and development of racism in our society, there are several excellent fairly recent publications including ones from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights,¹ by white psychiatrist Joel Kovel,² by black psychiatrists Price Cobbs and William Grier,³ the many excellent articles and books by Lerone Bennett, Jr., Senior Editor of *Ebony* magazine,⁴ and the National Book Award-winning historical analysis *White Over Black*, written by Winthrop Jordan.⁵

Racism in the Schools

How are school people involved in racism and what can they do about it? Institutional racism in schools appears in all major functions and operations, for example, (a) textbooks and other instructional materials, (b) the content of the curriculum, (c) knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of the student body and staff, (d) personnel selection and promotion procedures, (e) major organizational and instructional practices (grouping, testing, etc.).

Textbooks. Check out the reading series and the social studies textbooks in particular.

¹ Anthony Downs. "Racism in America and How To Combat It." U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Clearinghouse Publication, Urban Series No. 1. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1970.

² Joel Kovel. *White Racism: A Psychohistory*. New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1970.

³ William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs. *Black Rage*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1968.

⁴ Too numerous to list, but noteworthy among them is: Lerone Bennett, Jr. *The Negro Mood*. Chicago, Illinois: Johnson Publishing Company, 1970.

⁵ Winthrop Jordan. *White Over Black*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968.

They are not necessarily worse than the others, but their defects are usually more readily obvious. Simply count the total number of illustrations in one book and then the number in which black people and other minority groups appear. In how many of the latter do they appear as equal to whites or in a favorable status? How much of the world history book or world geography book is devoted to black and yellow people (who constitute a *majority* of the world population)? These are simple *quantitative* indices. For qualitative indices, see analysis sheets such as that used by the Detroit Public Schools.⁶ Even a cursory analysis will show that *every* textbook now in use seriously distorts by omission and commission.

What can we do about it? Some examples of low-risk actions would include: (a) having students examine the textbooks they use to discover for themselves the bias and distortion exhibited there; (b) telling every book salesman why his company's textbooks are not adequate, then writing those sentiments to the superintendent, local board of education, state board of education, and president of the book company; (c) developing a supplement to correct the deficiencies and/or purchasing supplementary books; and (d) establishing in-service education to upgrade staff knowledge in this field. Some high-risk actions would include: (a) refusing to use the textbooks because of their deficiencies, and/or (b) establishing protest groups to halt teaching in any subject for which the instructional materials available are inadequate because of significant omissions or distortion.

Content of the Curriculum. Does your curriculum include coverage of the nature of institutional racism in the U.S.A. as part of the required program? Does this treatment include local practices (including its existence in the schools), as well as examination of state and national manifestations?

What part of the curriculum is devoted to race-relations problems internationally,

⁶ Intergroup Relations Department. *Textbook Report*. Publication 1-112. Detroit, Michigan: Detroit Public Schools, 1968.

nationally, statewide, locally, and in the school itself?

Are the nature of racism and examination of race-relations problems covered in early elementary, later elementary, middle grades, and high school?

If the answer is "no" to any of the foregoing, what can we do about it? It can be as simple as asking those questions of other staff members individually, in committees, or at staff meetings, or writing letters to the central administration, the board of education, and "letters to the editor" of local newspapers, as well as raising the questions at PTA meetings and other public places.

Higher risk actions would be unilaterally to decide to add such study to your classroom or school curriculum, or to insist that no curriculum committee on which you serve has completed its task until these issues have been incorporated effectively into its work.

Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behavior. Does your school or district have an accurate assessment of what the students and staff know about racism, race-relations problems, and contributions of minority-group people in our country's past and present life?

Is there any kind of systematic attempt to determine what the attitudes and behaviors of staff and students are in relation to racism and race relations?

Is anybody trying to do something about inadequate knowledge and inappropriate attitudes and behaviors?

These questions are even more significant for an all-white setting than for a racially mixed or all-black one. It is there that such questions can more easily be ignored and therefore can result in entrenched ignorance, more biased attitudes, and most inappropriate behaviors outside of school and after school days are over.

Concerned educators can, with little effort, determine the degree of student awareness in a classroom (or school) simply by discussing the issues involved with staff or students or by making up their own questionnaires. The same can be done as part of self-examination by any group of interested

staff members and, preferably, by the total staff.

Higher risk actions would include making such assessments of staff knowledge, attitudes, and behavior a demand on the board by the local teachers or administrators group or by requesting a board policy along these lines. Even better, any bargaining unit could demand that in-service training for all staff be mandatory in such matters.

Personnel Selection and Promotion Procedures. Does the composition of the staff at each school and in the central office reflect national racial distribution, as a bare minimum, or local area racial composition (where higher) as a desirable minimum?

Are racial and ethnic minority group members properly represented at each echelon of administration and on the board of education?

Do promotion practices and procedures systematically work in favor of, or against, any racial or ethnic group?

As in other areas, we can at the very least raise these questions whenever and wherever we have the opportunity.

Other helpful actions would include formal requests that no additional whites be hired or promoted until some specified minimum of racial and ethnic composition is reached. The request could be escalated to a bargaining demand. A higher risk move would be to organize interested parents and students to protest present practices and insist on immediate changes.

Organizational and Instructional Practices. Testing and grouping are probably the two most insidious racist practices in the field of school organization and instruction.

All test-makers and most educators know that tests are biased in favor of white middle class people. The published results help reinforce the sick notion that white middle class children are superior and all others are inferior. Grouping based on test results makes the most of a bad thing. With the formation of so-called "ability" groups, we now "see" (literally) that poor children of racial and ethnic minorities are "stupid" and should be kept separate so as not to interfere

with the learning of those better-dressed and (generally) better-behaved children. This feeds the paranoia of racism in racially mixed communities. Ironically, ability grouping continues in the face of 30 years of research which shows it to be ineffective at best, and even harmful in some cases.⁷

Testing results are increasingly being published at the demand of state legislatures (including California and Michigan). Some black educators see this as a way of pointing out to "white" how poorly he has done by black students. The conclusion is undoubtedly correct, but the use of biased, distorted, and narrowly limited testing devices is a dangerous and misguided means for so doing.

Educators can help with low-key approaches, such as (a) reporting research from scholars concerning the inadequacies of testing and grouping, or (b) setting up local research designs to determine the efficacy of either. We can also refuse to test or to set up ability-grouped classes, whether we be teachers or administrators. The *Hobson v. Hansen* U.S. District Court decision is one indication of legal support for such a position.

In summary, every educator in our country is part of the racist society. We can

⁷ Miriam Goldberg, A. Harry Passow, and Joseph Justman. *The Effects of Ability Grouping*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1966.

recognize this and cry "mea culpa" while doing nothing—or just do nothing. No one will notice, particularly in an all-white community. In so doing, we would have ample company in history and in hell with the Germans of World War II who lived just outside the gates of Belsen or the Americans of World War II who saw innocent Japanese placed in "internment" camps or die under a mushroom cloud at Hiroshima and Nagasaki—and who did nothing and said nothing.

Or, we can decide that we are part of the problem and must do something—every day, wherever we are, whoever we are. It can be quiet and subdued or loud and angry. Each person has to decide what he can and should do. To "do nothing," however, is to maintain all the evils we see about us. There is no neutral ground. To act will be painful at times, in direct proportion to the effectiveness of the action.

There is the likely risk of losing some friends and the possible risk of losing a job. Racism is costly to black people and other minority racial groups in terms of health, income, education, and general quality of living. Giving up the "benefits" of racism can be costly in material benefits to whites. The question is, how much are we willing to pay for equality and justice in this land? No one else knows the answer for any of us. Each of us must provide his own. □



Racism and Education

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