

Breaking Down Racial Isolation

When students interact with peers of other races, they learn to reject stereotypes.

As principal of all-minority Annie Fisher School in Hartford, Connecticut, I was concerned about racial isolation. I wanted to give our students the opportunity to work with the white community. Paulie Brading, principal of all-white Morley School in West Hartford, had similar concerns. She feared that, unless her students really got to know some black students, they would accept the stereotypes of the past.

In June 1985 we met with Robert Content, director of the Science Museum of Connecticut, who wanted the museum to do more for inner-city students. This meeting gave birth to the "Across the Lines" project.

Across the Lines

The major goal of Across the Lines was to bring students from the two schools together. We decided to aim for a racial mix of 50-50 rather than placing a few blacks in a white class, as had been done in past efforts. We also decided that the contacts would focus on academics, allowing students to study together.

With the help of team leaders from the two schools, we began to plan for the fall. To develop lasting relationships between students, we decided that (1) classes would meet in planned

programs several times during the year, and (2) students would be paired off randomly as pen pals and write often during the year. With Robert Content's guidance, we set up an MCI Electronic Mail connection between the two schools to encourage frequent communication.

Student Expectations

The school psychologist used an "imaging" study to assess students' attitudes and expectations. The findings showed

that many black students believed whites had a negative perception of them in social and academic areas. This was confirmed when white students reported negative expectations.

White students' perceptions of blacks included poor grammar, bad manners, low intelligence, loud radios, drug use, and so on. Black students' perceptions of whites included high intelligence, preppy clothes, big houses, college plans, good behavior in school, and the like. From these stereotypical responses, we knew that our project was sorely needed.

Working Together

The first class get-togethers took place at the museum, where the dinosaur display was a major attraction. The students met, paired with their pen pals, and worked on a series of studies together. We wanted the students to realize that both groups could read, write, communicate, and work together.

Following the initial meetings, teachers worked out their own programs. Individual classes would meet at one of the schools for joint studies followed by lunch, recess, and games. Several classes took joint field trips on study projects.

Post-testing indicated that many students were pleasantly surprised by

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these encounters: most faults they expected in the other group did not exist. Students acknowledged that some faults they had expected in others also existed in their *own* groups. Some black students were still skeptical of the white students, but they felt they could enter a mostly white gathering with less apprehension.

From the outset parents participated in the program. The PTAs exchanged invitations to meetings. In the fall of the second year, a major program was planned at Fisher. Over 400 parents, students, and teachers assembled to meet the past year's pen pals, see the new classes, visit the rooms, and share refreshments.

A Continuing Effort

The program is now in its fifth year. Each year we try to build even stronger relationships and more effective learning situations. Black and white students' attitudes toward one another are now based on familiarity rather than ignorance. With the committed efforts of teachers and the support of parents, we are meeting this important student—and societal—need. □

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Confronting Racism in the Schools

This May 1989 Bulletin from the Oregon School Study Council will help teachers, administrators, and school board members who want to combat racism aggressively. The Bulletin offers suggestions for responding to acts of racism and gives examples of programs that promote cultural acceptance. Available from Editor, OSSC, University of Oregon, 1787 Agate St., Eugene, OR 97403. 33 pp. Copies are \$5 each, with a \$2 handling fee added to billed orders.

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