

The Resurgence of Racism

Reducing the Impact of Racism on Students

Educators can combat racism by punishing racist behaviors and honoring pluralism.

Should teachers and administrators be concerned with the impact of racism on students, especially if students are reacting to racist experiences outside the educator's immediate control? Perhaps educators in inner-city schools do not deal with racism because they know they cannot control their students' experiences or because they do not want to take time away from other subjects. Educators in predominantly white schools, on the other hand, may believe that they don't have to address racism because they have few or no minority students.

I contend that avoidance of this issue has two damaging consequences for the classroom. First, racism diverts minority students' attention and interest from academic pursuits: because racism is a strongly negative emotional experience for these students, they are likely to spend time and energy responding to it in nonconstructive ways. Second, avoiding or ignoring racism sends signals to white students that racism is acceptable or at least a trivial issue.

Educators need to do more than simply understand and identify racism

and its impact on students. They need to actively counteract this problem.

Setting Expectations

School boards and superintendents of school districts can work actively to reduce racism by:

- articulating a clear statement of expectations regarding racism;
- establishing and enforcing a series of consequences for violations of those expectations;

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- providing rewards for those who strive to reduce racism in their schools and classrooms.

Some educators may have given up trying because countering racism is hard work and there may be no rewards in it. In fact, some educators may actually be punished for attacking racism, especially when such action is perceived as "rocking the boat."

Even if school boards and high-level district officials adopt anti-racism policies, however, there remains a need for action at individual schools. Building administrators, like their counterparts at the district level, need to state a clear policy against any form of racism. This policy must be well publicized, not only to teachers and other staff, but also to students and their parents. Equally important, principals must be willing to follow through on their policies: they must be brave enough to punish not only racist students but also racist teachers. Such punishments should reflect the importance of the policy; they should not be the mild slap-on-the-hand so often meted out. Too often, racism is ignored, or punished only after the administrator has been asked repeat-

edly to take action; and many times the administrator's attitude clearly indicates that the punishment is not to be taken seriously. For example, in one case where a white student called a black teacher "nigger," an administrator refused to intervene, saying the student was "just having a hard day."

In addition to punishing racist behaviors, building administrators need to reward and encourage those on their staff who try to reduce racism. While building administrators may have relatively little control over major reward systems, they control a few perks in their schools. Those who patiently and consistently encourage efforts to combat racism create a climate that supports both positive interaction and learning.

The Teacher's Role

In their classrooms, teachers can mitigate racism in several ways. First, they can remember that they are models and that students will often follow their lead. Therefore, they need to assess how they interpret the behavior of both minority and white students. I have found, for example, that white teachers of integrated classrooms spend inordinate amounts of time worrying over the fact that minority children often prefer to sit together and play together; yet these same teachers rarely worry about white students' sitting together. This worry may reflect a teacher problem rather than a student problem. Whom students choose to sit with is much less important than the overall ambience of the classroom.

Classroom ambience is determined in part by the way the teacher handles racist behavior. Teachers should confront behavior that may be either intentionally or unintentionally racist. They should point out the behavior, label it as racist, indicate they will not tolerate it, and explain why. Explanations should vary for different age groups to match their levels of cognitive development. For example, a teacher of elementary students might explain the effects of racism in terms of the personal feelings of the victim; the middle school teacher could discuss racism in terms of individual

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rights; and the high school teacher might talk about justice and human rights.

The atmosphere of a classroom is influenced greatly by the academic expectations a teacher holds for students. All too often teachers have been socialized to hold lower academic expectations for minority students than for white students. Teachers express these lower expectations when they give simpler tasks to minority students than to whites; allow minority students to "get away with" doing less academic work than whites; focus more time on social behavior among minority students and on academic behavior among white students; attribute poor academic performance by minority students to factors outside the students' control while attributing performance in white students to effort and other factors within the students' control. Behaviors such as these convey the message that learning and academic excellence are outside the purview of certain racial or ethnic groups.

Teacher behaviors, moreover, often offer more encouragement to white

students. To counteract this, teachers need to carefully monitor their own behavior. One way to do this is to invite a friendly and honest colleague to observe one's classroom interaction and give informal feedback. In addition, if teachers make clear and positive statements of academic expectations to the entire class, they send a message that learning is valued for *all* students. Furthermore, teachers need to communicate to students not only that they have the potential to be successful in academic work but also that such work is worthwhile. Finally, in assessing student performance, teachers need to be sure to give both minority and white students encouragement and specific suggestions about how to improve academic work.

Honoring Pluralism

The way educators handle pluralism also affects the ambience of the classroom and of the school. Pluralism is typically acknowledged in schools by devoting short concentrated periods of the school year to the "celebration" of some minority group's history and culture. Once a year, pictures of minority cultural heroes—usually selected by whites—appear on classroom and hall walls. Black spirituals are sung, American Indian dances are performed, and the traditional clothing of various Hispanic and Asian cultures is displayed. After this period is over, teachers and administrators get back to the "important" subjects of school.

We need to do more to honor pluralism. We need not only to recognize the existence of other cultures but also to incorporate them into the class-

New and Interesting

A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society, a new book from the National Research Council, gives a comprehensive picture of the status of black Americans today. Among the topics covered are social and economic changes; identity and institutions in the black community; political participation; crime and criminal justice; and health, education, and family life. The book also considers policies and programs that hold the most promise for overcoming problems blacks face in employment, housing, income, and education.

Available from National Academy Press, 2101 Constitution Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20418, for \$35.00. Call (202) 334-3313 for information.

room every day. Non-European cultures must be presented not as adjuncts to the "regular" curriculum but as part of the total curriculum presented to the child. This is necessary not only in classrooms that are culturally heterogeneous but also in classrooms composed primarily or solely of white students. Why not discuss African or Chinese fiction? Recognize that world history includes the history of Africa and Asia? Demonstrate to children that American history includes the perspective of American Indians and blacks as well as whites? Some educators need to overcome their ethnocentrism and open themselves—and their students—to the achievements and experiences of other cultures.

A Major Force

Racism continues to be a major, if long denied, force that affects the attitudes

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and behavior of children today. In the next few years, issues of race will become even more critical in our society. Current demographic trends indicate that the United States is becoming an even more pluralistic nation. The populations of people of color are

younger than those of whites and therefore are likely to be a major force in educational and economic institutions in the years to come. How will whites react to this change? Will they continue to fight against people of color to maintain an outmoded system of traditions? Or will they learn to accept cultural pluralism beyond the level of lip service and make this one of the few truly multiracial, multicultural nations on earth?

Educators will help decide how these questions are answered. Although schools alone cannot control the level of racism in society, they can do much to counteract this ugly American tradition. □

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NMSA Releases National Study on Middle Grades Education

The National Middle School Association recently released a 112 page study that provides comprehensive data on the current status and progress of education in the middle made in the last 20 years.

Written by William Alexander and C. Kenneth McEwin, "Schools in the Middle: Status and Progress", analyzes results of the authors' study and is partially a replication of the 1968 national study on middle grades education conducted by Alexander.

The book is replete with tables and figures which assist the reader with the data.

The final chapter of the book describes how the information can be used as a vehicle for school improvement. It fills the long-standing need for information to assess the growing middle school movement.

"Schools in the Middle" will readily claim a permanent place of importance to middle level education and is one of special significance.

The book is perfect bound and costs \$10.00 per copy. See order information next column.



NMSA has also recently released "The Japanese Junior High School": A View from the Inside," by Paul George with Evan George and Tadahiko Abiko. The book details a two month observation of a Japanese Junior High School by the author and his son Evan, who was enrolled in the school during the study. Father and son share their reflections and Professor Abiko, a Japanese educator offers his reflections. A detailed and intimate look at the Japanese Junior High School.

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