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RESEARCH

Racism and Mental Health: Are Schools Hostile Learning Environments for Students of Color?

AMY MASKO

There is a whole body of research that examines school climate for the purpose of ensuring students attend a safe, supportive school in order to flourish in their academic and emotional growth. Educators are concerned with the high-stakes testing environment that students experience in modern schooling, the increase in bullying behaviors, and the intolerant conditions of schooling for children of color. This paper focuses on the racial climate of schools and the link between racism and mental health for students of color, arguing that teachers and administrators need to take steps to increase tolerance and reduce racism in their schools and classrooms. The everyday experience with racism that many children and youth of color face in their schooling is an environmental stressor that can lead to depression, anxiety, rage, and other mental distress.

The Context of Racism in Schools

Students of color are engaged in the process of racial identity development while they also attend to their intellectual and emotional development within schools that are institutionally racist environments. Racism can occur in schools on three different levels. Thompson (2010) describes these three levels as institutional, structural, and personal. Institutional racism denotes more than a personal ideology of prejudice. It is a system of cultural messages and institutional practices and policies that give advantage to some, based on race (Tatum, 2003). American schooling is established on white, middle class values, or the values of the majority (Delpit, 2006), which often function as a barrier to those not of the majority, and as such is often identified as institutionally racist (Thompson, 2010). We see evidence of institutional racism regularly in schools. For example, we see culturally biased assessments, including IQ tests (Fish, 2001; Jencks & Phillips, 1998), a misunderstanding of language norms between Standard American English and vernacular Englishes

(Wheeler and Swords, 2006), disparate discipline referrals and practices (Skibba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002), and hegemonic curriculum (Gay, 2000; Leonardo & Grubb, 2014).

Structural racism is embedded in the structure of schooling itself. Thompson (2010) describes analyzing the practices and elements (the structures) that are unique to schooling to determine if they are barriers and hindrances to racial and ethnic minorities. Examining the structural racism allows researchers to examine education in its broadest sense. For example, school districts in the US are largely segregated, even more so now than during the time of Jim Crow laws (Kozol, 2006). This example of structural racism is particularly true in Michigan, which is one of the most segregated states in the nation, where over half of the African American population attends school where 90% of the student body is Black (Detroit Free Press, 2014).

The final occurrence of racism in schools is personal racism. Personal racism is concerned with individual people who hold and act on racist beliefs. In schools we see this most often with teachers holding lower expectations for their students of color because they hold the misinformed belief that children of color, particularly African-American children, are of lower intelligence (Delpit, 2013) or that Latino parents do not care about education (Viadero, 1996). Furthermore, personal racism can occur among teachers when a student of color reports an act of racism he or she experienced, and the teacher discounts the experience and does not address the infraction, leaving the student of color feeling misunderstood, unsafe, and unprotected by their teachers (Masko, 2005).

Other times the personal racism occurs between two students, either as an altercation, inappropriate joke, or some other interaction. We often hear of these instances in our own schools or read about them in local newspapers: a White student calls a Black student the n-word (*Grand Haven Tribune*, 2013) or a predominately White basketball team uses racial epithets toward a predominately minority basketball team (*Holland Sentinel*, 2012) in a conference game. These

experiences are rarely anomalies, but rather everyday experiences for students of color in their lives at school. In an article describing the experience of racism for students of color in an ethnographic study, I wrote,

Many of the children in my study, who are of various ethnic backgrounds reported, during their interviews, experiencing racism in their daily lives—in their community, at their school, and at [their after school program]. For example, one Cambodian boy described his peers making fun of the way he speaks, an African American boy recalled being called an orangutan, Keandra remembered being called a [n-word], and an Asian-Indian girl stated that she has been told that her mother is Osama Bin Laden. Thus no ethnicity represented . . . was immune to racism. (Masko, 2005, p. 340).

Teachers often have to guide students through these not-so-subtle acts of racism (both the perpetrators and the victims), but there are often more subtle examples, of which teachers may not even be aware. Microaggressions, which are “subtle insults (verbal and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 60) can have a debilitating effect on students on the receiving end, yet White teachers are often unaware of these small daily attacks. Research on race is increasingly focusing on these microaggressions, as the effects can be significant. A recent legal analysis indicated that microaggressions are being cited more often in workplace discrimination cases (King, Dunleavy, Dunleavy, Jaffer, & Morgan, 2011), as well, suggesting that the face of racism is changing to a much more subtle form.

Racial Identity Development in the Context of Racism

Institutional, structural, and personal racism are some of the various ways that students of color may experience discrimination in their daily lives at school, during the period in their lives when their racial identity is developing (Tatum, 2003). Racial identity develops over the lifetime of a person beginning in the pre-school years. Children in the pre-school years begin to think about race and construct their classification of people by the color of their skin (Hirschfeld, 1996; King, Chipman, & Cruz, 1994; Tatum, 2003). This early racial identity is superficial in nature, aligned with folk biology in that children categorize based on obvious physical characteristics, such as skin color, and that they recognize some level

of inheritance in the notion of race (Hirschfeld, 1996). While children notice racial differences, and often begin to identify desirable racial traits, they do not begin to self-segregate until the adolescent years (Tatum, 2003). Spencer, Swanson, and Cunningham (1991) explain that

This period represents the developmental stage wherein insecurity about the ‘self’ characterizes the normative state of feelings and associated experiences for all adolescents, independent of their group’s unique cultural experiences or social status. While the biological experience of puberty supersedes all group characteristics, membership in a disfavored group typically exacerbates puberty-linked insecurities. (p. 80)

Scholar bell hooks (1995) posits that self-segregation is a coping mechanism for racism. Tatum (2003) agrees, stating in “racially mixed settings, racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor—racism. Joining one’s peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy” (p. 60). As these scholars point out, racial identity development, which is a normal part of human emotional growth, is occurring in the context of racism, a common environmental stressor in schooling.

As Pieterse and his colleagues (2012) point out, scholars, going back as far as W.E.B. DuBois in 1898 and Franz Fanon in the 1960s have suggested that the experience of racism exacts a “significant psychological toll on people” (p. 2). Furthermore, scholars have been considering the impact of racism on the mental health of students for a very long time (see Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012; Harvey, 1984). As Harvey (1984) reminds us, no “other social institution impacts on the mental health of so many Black people in such a direct and significant way as does the educational system” (p. 444).

Racism and Mental Health

A recent meta-analysis of 66 studies between 1996 and 2011 demonstrate the real and significant link between the perception of racism and mental health (Pieterse, et al., 2012). There is discussion in the field of psychology about how to diagnose and treat both racism and patient responses to racism. Barbee (2002) suggests that while there are calls in the field of psychology to suggest that racism should be treated like a disease, it is problematic to diagnose it as such, since such a typology locates the disease within the biology of the individual and ignores the greater social context. This notion is further problematic because it suggests treating the

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perpetrators, rather than the victims of racism, who are the people most likely to seek treatment. As such, she points out that “psychiatric nurses need to recognize that racism is profoundly deleterious to the mental health of millions of people” (Barbee, E. 2002, p. 194).

A study of over 5000 fifth graders and their parents suggest that the link between perceived racism and mental disorders is strong. Children who reported perceived racial/ethnic discrimination were more likely to have symptoms of each of the 4 mental health conditions included in the analysis: depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and conduct disorder. An association between perceived racial/ethnic discrimination and depressive symptoms was found for Black, Hispanic, and other children, but not for White children (Coker, Elliott, Kanouse, Grunbaum, Schwebel, Gilliland, Tortolero, Peskin, & Schuster, 2009, p. 878).

Fifth-graders who feel they’ve been discriminated against because of their race are much more likely than classmates without such feelings to have symptoms of mental disorders, especially depression (Coker, et al., 2009). *USA Today*, in reporting this study stated that “Hispanics who report racism are more than three times as likely as other children to have symptoms of depression; African Americans are more than twice as likely; and those of “other” minority races have almost quadruple the odds” (*USA Today*, May 6, 2009).

Discounting a person’s experiences can lead to feelings of hopelessness, yet this is a fairly regular experience for both students of color (Masko, 2005), and for White students when their feelings of guilt or shame are ignored when talking about racism within the curriculum (Masko, 2008). In a

study I conducted in 2003, I found that adults in school and community-based youth organizations often gave children the advice to “ignore it [racism],” or suggested that they “will grow out of it [feelings of racism]” (see Masko, 2005b; 2008). Yet, hooks (1995) suggests that

collective failure to address adequately the psychic wounds inflicted by racist aggression is the breeding ground for a psychology of victimhood wherein learned helplessness, uncontrollable rage, and/or feelings of overwhelming powerlessness and despair about in the psyches of black folks yet are not attended to in ways that empower and promote wholistic (sic)

states of well-being (p. 137).

Depression, tension, and rage are the most commonly reported mental health problems associated with racism within the African American population (Barbee, 2002), with anger being identified as a both a common coping mechanism to deal with racism, while at the same time negatively impacting the mental well-being of African Americans (Pittman, 2011). Landrin and Klonoff (1996) concur, reporting that in a study of 153 African American women and men, African Americans with high total stress-related psychiatric symptoms of anxiety, depression, and feelings of inadequacy, reported more frequent racism in the past year than those with low symptoms. Barbee (2002) goes on to state that everyday racial stressors, such as microaggressions, significantly related to mental distress. “Racism today is much more subtle and more destructive, insidious, and damaging to people’s mental health” (Barbee, 2002, p. 197).



Self-Portrait, William H. Johnson

Reflection: How Should Schools Respond?

The data are clear: students of color attend school every day in a climate that is institutionally, structurally, and personally racist. The experience of very large sub-groups of our population are asked daily to learn in what is the equivalent to a hostile work environment. The U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission defines a “hostile work environment” for employment discrimination as follows:

Harassment is a form of employment discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, (ADEA), and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, (ADA).

Harassment is unwelcome conduct that is based on race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information. Harassment becomes unlawful where 1) enduring the offensive conduct becomes a condition of continued employment, or 2) the conduct is severe or pervasive enough to create a work environment that a reasonable person would consider intimidating, hostile, or abusive. Anti-discrimination laws also prohibit harassment against individuals in retaliation for filing a discrimination charge, testifying, or participating in any way in an investigation, proceeding, or lawsuit under these laws; or opposing employment practices that they reasonably believe discriminate against individuals, in violation of these laws.

Petty slights, annoyances, and isolated incidents (unless extremely serious) will not rise to the level of illegality. To be unlawful, the conduct must create a work environment that would be intimidating, hostile, or offensive to reasonable people. Offensive conduct may include, but is not limited to, offensive jokes, slurs, epithets or name calling, physical assaults or threats, intimidation, ridicule or mockery, insults or put-downs, offensive objects or pictures, and interference with work performance. Harassment can occur in a variety of circumstances, including, but not limited to, the following:

The harasser can be the victim’s supervisor, a supervisor in another area, an agent of the employer,

a co-worker, or a non-employee. The victim does not have to be the person harassed, but can be anyone affected by the offensive conduct. Unlawful harassment may occur without economic injury to, or discharge of, the victim.

While terms like “reasonable person” and “severe and pervasive” are subjective terms and require a court to interpret (King, et al., 2011), most would likely agree that children and adolescents do not have the adult stamina to regularly experience racism without significant negative impact on their psyches. The research is clear that there is a link between the experience of racism and the mental health of people of color. As school administrators, teachers, and other school staff, we have an obligation to address this large public health issue.

“If children do not feel understood, respected, and protected by their teachers, their learning can be negatively impacted” (Masko, 2005b). It is critical for teachers to teach and manage classroom and school behaviors within a culturally responsive framework, which includes both teaching in a manner that builds on students’ cultural knowledge, but also responding to racism with empathy, compassion, and seriousness. Teachers and school administrators often discount students’ complaints about racism, treating them with far less seriousness than other disciplinary infractions, which results in children feeling unprotected by the adults charged to care for them at school (Masko, 2005b). Teachers need to be trained in how to be culturally responsive, both in how to talk about race within their curriculum, recognizing and honoring everyone’s emotions around the topic, as well as how to handle disciplinary actions with seriousness and empathy. These are approaches that every teacher can take, but language arts teachers have access to tools that make redressing racism achievable: literature and writing.

By utilizing multicultural children’s and young adult literature in their classrooms (see Appendix A), teachers have the opportunity to have meaningful conversations with their students about their feelings around racism. There are a number of books that examine racism, exclusion, and interracial friendships that can provide a content to explore students’ emotions related to this topic. Furthermore, writing teachers know that student writing often provides an opportunity to explore topics with students that are causing them internal strife or pain. Writing is often used in therapy for the purpose of exploring difficult emotions with the goal of healing. Writing teachers have explored its use in the classroom with a similar goal in mind (Bishop, 1993). And of course, we see in some young adult literature how therapeutic writing is

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utilized in a classroom. *Love That Dog*, by Sharon Creech, for example, illustrates how poetry helps a young boy heal from the loss of his dog, while *Locomotion*, by Jacqueline Woodson, demonstrates how a middle school boy uses writing assignments to grapple with the death of his parents, and his subsequent time in foster care. In both books, writing is the tool teachers use to connect emotionally with their students, thus fostering an opportunity for the main characters to process their feelings of loss.

Educators need to know that the learning environment is critical for students to feel safe, protected, and understood. Without such an environment, students are at risk for mental illness. Teachers and administrators have an obligation to protect the emotional health of their students by being mindful of the school climate, addressing racism with empathy and seriousness, and providing opportunities for students to explore their feelings related to racism through literature and writing.

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Appendix A. Web Resources

Web Resources for Multicultural Books and Curriculum to Foster Classroom Conversations about Racial Identity, Interracial Friendships, and Racism

Curricular Resources

Teaching Tolerance www.tolerance.org
The Reach Center www.reachctr.org
Rethinking Schools www.rethinkingschools.org

Booklists

Teaching For Change
www.bbpbooks.teachingforchange.org/best-recommended/booklist.

Bankstreet Library
www.bankstreet.edu/library/children-resources/childrens-book-lists/multicultural-books-younger-children.

Association for Library Service to Children
<http://www.ala.org/alsc/compubs/booklists/growing-upwrld/GrowingUpAroundWorld>.

American Library Association--Coretta Scott King Award Recipients
<http://www.ala.org/emiert/ckskbookawards/recipients>.

National Education Association--50 Multicultural Books
<http://www.nea.org/grants/50-multicultural-books.html>.