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Broaching the Subjects of Race, Ethnicity, and Culture with Students

Commentary by Shawn Bultsma
In my roles and experiences in education as both a teacher and a school counselor, I have observed many of my well intentioned white colleagues subscribe to a color-blind approach in their work with students of color. This approach was one that I naively subscribed to early in my career in response to concerns of discrimination, prejudice and white supremacy. I recall professing on more than one occasion: “I don’t see color; all students are the same in my eyes.”

This simplistic understanding was my well intentioned attempt as a new teaching professional to judge students by their internal character rather than the color of their skin. I recall feeling stunned and confused when I first learned that this statement is offensive to students of color because it renders them invisible by overlooking the different role that race plays in their lives compared to the role that it plays for white students.

Through repeated exposure to this reality I have come to recognize that people of color see the world through a filter reminding them every day that race matters. I have also come to understand that most white folks, who also comprise a race, do not view the world through this same racial awareness filter.

The cognitive dissonance resulting from the lack of fit between my good intentions and the offensive nature of my naive sentiment challenged me to think about race in a more sophisticated manner. In essence, I learned that I was using these seemingly innocent words to absolve myself from taking personal responsibility for perpetuating racism. At the same time my color-blind lens was helping me modulate the fear that I might be perceived as a racist. As it turns out, my claim to not see color was allowing me to remain passive, indifferent, and inactive when considering race, ethnicity, and cultural issues impacting students.

With the ever increasing diversity of our schools, I worry that teachers, school counselors, administrators, and other school professionals who subscribe to a color-blind philosophy of race will not have the skills necessary to explore the salience that race, ethnicity, and culture play for students of color. In my current practice as a school counselor educator I find myself trying to help graduate students understand race, ethnicity, and cultural issues in more complex and sophisticated ways so that they do not assume passive, indifferent, and inactive postures when working with students of color.

One concern expressed by graduate students struggling to understand the exploration of the salience of race, ethnicity, and culture in their work with students of color is that this focus could result in making race an issue even when it seems clear that it is not. As educators we are faced with a dilemma. If race matters for our students of color, how do we work with them without turning everything into a race issue?

To help graduate students resolve this dilemma, I encourage them to err on the side of broaching the subjects of race, ethnicity, and culture with students to determine the degree that it is impacting their situations or concerns. Broaching the subjects of race, ethnicity, and culture refers to considering to what extent racial, ethnic, and cultural factors are influencing students’ concerns (refer to the chart for varying degrees of broaching identities).

During the broaching process, students’ race, ethnicity, and culture are not necessarily defined as the primary source of concerns, but rather students are considered in a racial, ethnic, and cultural context. That is, students and school professionals work together to determine the degree to which (if at all) racial, ethnicity, and cultural issues are impacting students’ concerns. Acknowledging racial, ethnicity, and cultural factors contributes to school professionals’ credibility with students of color and increases the depth of students’ willingness to disclose and/or discuss their concerns whether or not these concerns are related to racial, ethnicity, and cultural issues. Failure to address the degree to which these factors impact students’ concerns perpetuates students’ perceived racial, ethnic, and cultural bias.

Adopting an identity that does not fear broaching the subjects of race, ethnicity, and culture with students allows school personnel to recognize the salience that race plays in the daily lives of students of color both in and out of school. A broaching identity also validates the experiences of students of color in ways that encourage them to embrace their unique identities and experiences in a dominant culture that often minimizes the experiences of students of color using a color-blind approach.

Broaching the subjects of race, ethnicity, and culture pays dividends for students of color because it helps them recognize that the adults in their schools value them for their rich, diverse contributions to the school community. Our school communities also stand to benefit as these students become engaged as valued, contributing members where everyone understands that race matters.

### Description of Broaching Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Attitude Towards Broaching</th>
<th>Broaching Behavior</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infusing/Integrated/</td>
<td>Broaching is regarded as an important aspect of work with students of color and is related to other efforts to eliminate oppression and promote social justice and equality</td>
<td>Demonstrates a commitment towards broaching race, ethnicity, and culture and feels a sense of responsibility towards eradicating all forms of oppression</td>
<td>Broaching represents a way of being—it is not just incorporated as a professional obligation; broaching is a lifestyle orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congruent/Continuing/</td>
<td>Accepts and encourages students to make culture specific interpretations of their concerns</td>
<td>Values the importance of broaching cultural factors in order to strengthen the relationship with the student</td>
<td>Broaches the subject of race effectively when working with students of color; integrates broaching behavior into professional identity; can distinguish between cultural specific behaviors and unhealthy human functioning; recognizes complexities associated with race and culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incongruent</td>
<td>Maintains an openness towards broaching cultural factors but lacks the accompanying skill set</td>
<td>Recognizes the importance of broaching cultural factors</td>
<td>May broach cultural factors several times albeit mechanically; struggles to translate recognition of cultural factors into effective strategies and interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolating</td>
<td>Agrees to broach but harbors reservations due to limited sense of personal efficacy and a concern about potential student reactions</td>
<td>Recognizes the need for broaching but may have reservations about broaching due to discomfort, lack of skill, and/or concern about negative reactions from the student</td>
<td>Broaches cultural factors reluctantly and in a simplistic and superficial manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>Ignores, minimizes racial/cultural factors and maintains a race neutral perspective on sociopolitical issues</td>
<td>Adopts a posture of oblivion, resistance, and defensiveness when asked to broach; feels broaching is unnecessary</td>
<td>Refusal to consider contextual dimensions of race, ethnicity, and culture</td>
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</tbody>
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