

Case Study: Education Inequities and Colorblind Racism

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Introduction

Very recently, I removed my daughter from her current Public Montessori charter school. This decision was based on my daughter not feeling like a valued part of the school and the community. As the only Black girl in her class, she experienced microaggressions from her teacher, teasing from her classmates about her hair, and for the first time, she begged to have her curly hair straightened. Most recently, her teacher and the entire charter management organization chose not to acknowledge Black History month; instead, February was announced as "Attendance Awareness Month." Giving the benefit of the doubt, I expected that teachers would celebrate within their classrooms, but by the second week of February, I realized this would not be the case in my daughter's class. I emailed the teacher and offered assistance. She responded by explaining that she would not cover Black History Month because she did not have time in her curriculum but that I could give a mini lesson as part of my daughter's sharing week. Black History was reduced to twenty minutes to share something about my daughter's interests. My daughter's experience is not isolated; it is an experience shared by many students of color in schools across the nation and it affects their academic success (Kumar, Zusho, & Bondie, 2011).

Background

My daughter's experience is an example of Colorblind racism, an ideology quite different from traditional racism. Although "Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi observed that racism in contemporary research continues to be viewed as extreme acts committed by an ignorant or ill-intentioned few" (as cited in Harper, 2012, p. 10), Bonilla-Silva (2015) best captured my daughter's experiences and the experiences of other students of color in present-day United States as color-blind racism. He defined this ideology as "based on the superficial extension of the principles of liberalism to racial matters that results in 'raceless' explanations for all sort of race-related affairs" (p. 1364). By assuming that society is racially neutral and removing race from salient issues, one erases the importance of race (Lopez, 2003). In my

daughter's case, color-blind racism appeared as a form of cultural racism in which her culture was undervalued and in some ways, erased.

Colorblind racism is a product of the time period many mistakenly refer to as "post-racial" America. Post-racial America is a result of desegregation efforts of the Civil Rights era - generally speaking - and educationally, after the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). However, Peter H. Irons (2002) pointed out the flaw in this belief. He argued, "to assume that two generations of desegregation would erase the educational harm of the preceding five or six generations is simply wrong" (as cited in Samad, 2009, p. 11). Additionally, American education as a microcosm of society is wrought with cultural hegemony. It "emerges in the imposition of Eurocentric beliefs, values, and mores on minority students through school curriculum and policies that silence their voices" (Banks, 2006; Delpit 2006; as cited in Kumar et. al, 2011, p. 87).

Evaluation

By silencing my daughter's voice and not recognizing her culture or its contribution to the world, her value as a student and as a human being was undermined. Kumar et. al (2011) referred to this issue as the cultural cost (p. 83); as a student in the class, there was also an academic cost (Schunk, 2020, p. 377) of engaging in work that seemingly erased her very nature. When a student considers the cost too high, it can affect both the emotional well-being and motivation which negatively impacts educational performance and academic success (American Psychological Association, 2015; Kumar, 2011, p. 83; Mayer, 2011, p. 39; Schunk, 2020, p. 377).

Unfortunately, these academic effects are often misnomered as the academic achievement gap. Therefore, past solutions focused on the student more often than the teacher or the structure - thereby creating a deficit model of education for Black students and other students of color (Bush & Bush, 2018). More recent solutions such as strategies based on Critical Race Theory (CRT) seem a bit more promising. The role of CRT is to highlight that a belief in "neutral society" ignores racism and reduces the term to

overt/blatant individual acts of hatred (Lopez, 2003). However, opponents to CRT argue that it also contributes to the deficit model (Bush & Bush, 2018, p. 2).

Solutions

Those seeking to “even the playing field” of American education should look to the work of Gray, Hope and Matthews (2018) who argued that students who feel a sense of belonging at school are more successful both academically and psychologically (p. 97). Specifically, they posited that interpersonal, instructional and opportunity structures are necessary for the academic success of Black children. One specific, measurable and scalable solution to the issue of disconnect for Black students in school is the DuBoisian initiative of ensuring that Black students learn about their history and culture in school (Gray, et al., 2018, p. 101). Gray et al. (2018) explained the concept of the “anteriority of classical African civilizations, which is the view that Ancient Kemet (Egypt) represents Black excellence in the sense that it is a source of many intellectual traditions including geometry, philosophy, arts, and sciences” (James, 1954, as cited in Gray et al., 2018, p. 100).

This strategy considers how educational structures play a role in a child’s motivation to learn. In doing so, schools can utilize instructional and institutional opportunity structures to begin the reversal of exclusion in academia as evidenced throughout history (Gray, et al., 2018, p. 101; Painter, 2010, p. x). Inclusion would again connect students to the curriculum. As the American Psychological Association (2010) determined in Principle 15 of the *Top 20 Principles from Psychology for Prek-12 Teaching and Learning*, “emotional well-being influences educational performance, learning, and development” (p. 23). Emotional well-being includes a sense of self, which can be accomplished through helping students to see a reflection of themselves in the curriculum.

Recommendations

It is simple enough to expect teachers to teach not just culturally relevant information, but to teach factual history. However, CRT reminds us that there is no such thing as a race-neutral curriculum.

Therefore, teachers must purposefully and actively seek facts, even beyond their own education and teacher preparation which has been historically lacking (Gay, 2014; Kumar, et al., 2018).

On a macro level, there must be an interrogation and revamping of the educational system from Pre-K through 20. For the purposes of this piece and scalability, a teacher who would like to enact change and ensure that all students, and especially Black students, felt connected to the curriculum could begin by simply recognizing the factual lack in the American education system, interrogating one's own curriculum and making changes or additions where necessary. In other words, teach accurate and inclusive history. And at the very least, schools should ensure that cultural holidays such as Black History Month are properly observed both in the classroom and as a school institution. For, most families do not have the luxury or option to remove their children from a harmful educational environment. And, they should not have to.

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