Empowering Students to Become Agents of Social Change

"If race disappears as a category of official division, as it has in most of the world, this will facilitate the emergence of a plural racial order where the groups exist in practice but are not official recognized - and anyone trying to address racial division is likely to be chided for racializing the population."

Did You Know
The Functions of Race-Neutrality

Did you know that when your students say Black Lives Matter and you respond that All Lives Matter, then you are devaluing student voices and lived experiences? Students from historically marginalized groups are engaging in civic action or demonstration to protest injustices in their school communities and within larger American society; if educators believe and say things to their students that suggest racism in the United States is no longer a major issue impacting students' lives, educators further perpetuate the systemic injustices students are speaking and acting to address. In this newsletter, we use the terms racial erasure (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004), race silence (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016), and color evasiveness (Annamma, Morrison, & Jackson, 2014) to lay out several ways educators unintentionally and intentionally devalue and invalidate students' racialized experiences and related responses. Educators who examine various manifestations of race-neutral actions toward and responses to students of color, including the function and potential impact of such actions, can simultaneously confront and disrupt their own participation in the systemic racism that has been affecting their students and communities throughout U.S. history.

A grounding assertion in our Equity Assistance Center work, is that educational policies, practices, interactions, and resources must be representative of, constructed by, and responsive to all people so that each individual has access to, can meaningfully participate in, and receive positive outcomes from high-quality learning experiences, regardless of individual characteristics and group memberships (Great Lakes Equity Center, 2012). However, certain "equity traps", including racial erasure, allow educators to claim that racism is a part of our past as a nation. Educators who engage in racial erasure may say and believe things like, "I don't see race. I see all students as equal human beings" (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Moreover, such a statement denies that the experiences of some students- in this case, students of color- are fraught with racist and other oppressive encounters that have real and cumulative impact on students' and communities' well-being. Racial erasure is central to the response "All Lives Matter" to students who insist, as we do as a Center, that "Black Lives Matter". In this examples, issues of dominance and white supremacy also undergird such a response; it is a failure to concede that Black Lives have and continue to be devalued in extremely

consequential and often violent ways through systemic and other forms of racism, and accordingly, re-centers whiteness as a response to students' claims of such devaluation. As Frederick Douglass reminded us all, "Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without ploughing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

Why It Matters
Color-Evasiveness and Race Neutrality: A Reflection of American Society

Racial Erasure and Silence within learning communities also reflects a continuing oppression within larger American Society, where sameness is conflated with equality (Fordham, 2010). Educational settings within this construct claim that all students can be competitive, self-sufficient entities who do not function socially and academically in a way that is different from any of their fellow students. This construct ignores how race remains a major American social category and how race effects the lived experiences of every American. This includes both educators and students, especially when considering the diverse social and cultural identity that exists within learning communities. If educators utilize constructs and language that evade their student's social and cultural differences, then they are also ignoring how these identities profoundly shape how their students are experiencing the educational settings within which they exist (Annamma, Morrison, & Jackson, 2014).

In fact, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2002) suggests that present day educators are more likely to make full use of the resources of color-neutral racism. Color-neutral ideologies allow White Americans, and more specifically White educators, to conceal any voicing of race by way of color-neutral language. Color-neutrality blurs the lines between races in order to prop up an argument that the differences between races are no longer necessary in the public dialogue. By avoiding the acknowledgement of inequities, these educators are not adequately addressing, confronting, and challenging the issues behind the activist causes that are important and real to many of their students.

In addition, Peter Kuryla (2011) claims that White America purports itself to be color-neutral in law, public conversations, and culture. White Americans have largely arrived at a color-neutral reality, or at least act as if they have. Overall, these

beliefs of color-neutrality are informing the practice of today's educators. This leads to white teachers and students existing and practicing within a color neutral reality, and forces historically marginalized students to exist within a reality that does not represent their lived experience.

It is also important to note that we are actively substituting phrases such as colorblind and due to their ableist nature (Whiteman, et.al, 2015; Annamma, Conner, & Ferri, 2013).

For Equity Now
Examining, then Confronting Race-Neutrality

This newsletter has explored how educators' race-neutral thoughts and actions actually contribute to the systemic racism and oppression of students of color who live a reality where race, and the systemic and individual acts of racism they encounter everyday, are major contributors to their lived experiences.

In order to remedy this divide between educators and students, educators must be willing to critically reflect on the reasons for, then abandon their buy-in to themes, beliefs, and languages that obscure systemic racism, if they are serious about enacting meaningful changes within their learning communities (Radd & Macey, 2013). This, in conjunction with increased interaction with students, can result in increased commonality among stakeholders, increased motivation to bridge differences and reduce prejudices, and increased communication and alliance building (Nagda & Gurin, 2007). In conclusion, educators who claim to want the best for their students must recognize the need for racial justice and, relatedly, the need to students' and their own racial justice work. Confronting their own manifestations of racial erasure, race-silence, race evasiveness, and color-neutrality within their local educational settings, is a good place to start.

Meet the Authors

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