

Reflections on Racism in American Schools

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Abstract

Reflecting on America's growing diversity in its educational system, and that the disconnect between races and culture is not even noticed, questioned, or challenged, the author observes and comments as a foreign university student studying educational leadership in the U.S. Commenting on ideas presented in Gary Howard's book, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know*, the view that White educators must reflect on their attitudes and practices pertaining to many diverse minority groups in schools today--and act to be a balm of healing and transformation. Today, more than any time since the Civil Rights movement, educators must recognize that the winds of change for including all races, beliefs, cultures, languages, genders, ethnicities, religions, and abilities must blow stronger with an urgency against further delay.

Keywords: racism, culture, dominant, minority, education, and equality.

1. Introduction

The issues regarding diversity in America and its schools are quite thought-provoking, eye-opening, and as this class progressed—complex. In comparison to my native country, America has difficulties and challenges that I have not before had an opportunity to consider because they simply do not exist in context and form there.

As we have peeled back the layers of diversity variables in education today, I think the most important is the one that has perhaps been the most surreptitious—so accepted by the mainstream dominant culture, that the resultant disconnections created between races and cultures are not even noticed, questioned, or challenged. This is the variable of White dominance. Many obstacles that exist in public education seem to stem from this one historical viewpoint that, even these hundreds of years into the existence of America, the ugly truth and consequences of it still remain. But, as Gary Howard pointed out, Whites have to be sensitive and open to becoming aware of these subtle—and not so subtle—messages of superiority, power, and privilege that have kept the “other” from attaining equality in American society. He quoted Barbara Kingsolver who wrote, “If we resent being bound by these ropes, the best hope is to seize them out like snakes by the throat, look them in the eye, and own up to the venom.” (p. 29). However, this is where progress is stymied; the dominant race is not yet resentful, nor wanting to wake up to its role in creating these societal and institutional problems through its lust for maintaining its elevated position, and take the steps necessary to heal and move forward.

2. Cultural Racism

The ramifications of racism in the dominant culture are pervasive even though, as we saw in the 2006 study (Sheryl, 2010), only 6% of Whites believe racism in America still exists. Yet, that is why the attitude is like a secret cancer, eating away at the dreams of equality for our students of diversity. It was heartbreaking to watch little Black girls not identify with being smart or beautiful because they didn't have White skin, or feel they met the criteria for society's definition of “beauty” in the video “A Girl Like Me.” Then to think that these attitudes were the same 50 years ago and that little, if anything, has changed in this regard. Even with Civil Rights gains and more opportunities since then, the discomfort with being who they are is paralyzing and sad. Identity was also something Howard talked about in regards to marginalized groups struggling to have their voices heard and “telling their own stories” (p. 66). White educators, as the majority in the field of education, must face the possibility—and probability—that they, too, are feeding the dominant mindset; albeit unintentionally. It is time to reflect, acknowledge, and take action.

3. Challenges

The other variables that are at play in the field of education today and hereby commented on are in no particular order. However, the need for multicultural awareness by curriculum developers has been around for decades now. One challenge here is that not all perspectives and groups can possibly be included in any one curriculum. Publishers should be sensitive and attempt to include all diverse populations as well as possible, although it will ultimately be the individual teacher's responsibility to allow for students of various groups to tell their “story”

and share with classmates. This is the way understanding and compassion for the “other” is developed and maintained.

Another challenge is the disproportionality of minorities in special education and gifted programs. African Americans and boys, especially, are vulnerable to being relegated to special education classes. The reason for this, Patton says, is that the special education system is inherently flawed and labels as “defective” students who fail in the regular classroom and don’t match the prescribed definition of the “norm” (Patton, 1998, p. 27). On the other side of the coin, students of minority groups, with the focus on African Americans again, are underrepresented in gifted programming (Banks & Cherry, 2013, p.292).

In both cases, interestingly but not surprisingly, these students were not understood culturally and linguistically and judgments were made that isolated them from their would-be peers. This is the reason students from linguistically diverse or different cultural backgrounds are also frequently disproportionately represented in special education or gifted programming (Banks & Cherry, 2013, p. 260).

4. Students' Program Needs

Misunderstanding second language learners’ obstacles (Banks & Cherry, 2013), and being sensitive to other cultures has not historically been the strength and focus of the U.S. educational system. But with demographics changing and EL students comprising upwards of 5.2 million, according to a 2006 survey (Banks & Cherry, 2013, p. 222), educators must recognize that the winds of change for including all races, beliefs, cultures, languages, genders, ethnicities, religions, and abilities must blow stronger with an urgency against further delay. Teacher training for cultural and linguistic background of these immigrant or first generation American students must be paramount in college university programs. Furthermore, continuing education for seasoned teachers in areas of changing demographics and inner cities could help the issues of cultural and language sensitivities.

Students with disabilities receiving special education services during the 2009-2010 academic year represented 12% of all students enrolled in public school that year (Banks & Cherry, 2013, p. 248). With the passage of IDEA, all students with disabilities became entitled to an education, regardless of the disability or its severity (Banks & Cherry, 2013, p. 252). The laws surrounding this particular area are many and clear, providing educators with major challenges to deliver individualized and relevant educational content to not only qualifying students in this defined realm, but to those who are additionally from minority or other diverse backgrounds.

These are but the challenges that impacted my thinking the most throughout the course of this class. There are others that will certainly also provide educators with complicated and multidimensional dynamics in their classrooms and require that they be open, proactive, and flexible in their thinking, not only as teachers, but as people.

5. Conclusion

Gary Howard’s book *We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know* gave me lots of food for thought and afforded me lots of great conversations with my White teacher friends. I found his outlook for the future of educational reform and *La Tierra Transformativa* nothing short of inspiring and hopeful. Perhaps it is idealistic to think that “transformational” White teachers could have so much potential healing power available to them in regards to educational reform. But, there is a lot of truth in what Howard says I’m told. There are many layers to the foundation of where America’s schools stand today, and change won’t be easy and immediate. However there are so many opportunities and areas in which to affect change in education and thereby, in the society at large. If and when the paradigm of the dominant White class can be overcome, “...beyond healing, our work is that of envisioning, creating, and modeling a better future, a new social paradigm that honors diversity and ensures greater equity for all of our people” (Howard, p. 143). This is what I wish also for my work as an educator, for my educator friends in the U.S., and for the future of American schools.

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