Race to Improve Teacher Education

Building Awareness for Instructional Practice

By H. Richard Milner IV

Throughout my career studying the relationship between race and teachers' instructional practices,[1] I've learned that many teachers may not fully realize the importance of this relationship or how it plays out in the classroom. For instance, one science teacher I worked with told me that when he first began his teaching career, he wanted to focus solely on teaching his content: "I just want them to get excited about science," he explained. However, he was a white teacher working in an urban school with students of color living below the poverty line. Often, students called him "racist," questioned his authority, expressed that he did not "know" them, and demanded that he change.

Although I highlight here the interactions between only one teacher and his students, I have observed such racial tensions in other classrooms as well,[2] and they tend to stem from a racial divide between teachers and students. The evidence is clear that white teachers can be and are successful teachers of students from varying racial backgrounds.[3] However, the research shows that they are successful because they build not only their knowledge of content and instructional skills but also their knowledge of how race and racist acts still influence society and education.

As challenges related to race* intensify in schools, I stress the necessity for teachers (prospective and practicing) to (1) build knowledge about race, (2) talk more often about race, and, consequently, (3) plan and enact curriculum and instructional practices focused on race with students of all races and backgrounds in schools.

Because of the range of teachers' grade levels and subject matter expertise, I cannot recommend exact instructional practices for each and every age. Nor would I suggest giving teachers a list of such examples, since building the knowledge committed to combating racism goes beyond some predetermined instructional script. But I can offer a few ideas. For instance, in developmentally appropriate ways, teachers can share video clips from the hit TV series *What Would You Do?* (available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWIph_xlTbY), which provides real-life racial experiences that people respond to. Such exposure allows students and teachers to think through the complexities of situations and to strategize about what they themselves might do. Moreover, there are many historical examples, such as slavery and Jim Crow, that students can learn about to better understand racism in society and education. As a practice, I would strongly encourage all students to engage in writing autobiographies that allow them to deepen their knowledge about their racial and cultural history. Learning about when they first came to understand differences

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*As I have written previously, race is constructed physically, contextually, socially, legally, and historically. The meanings, messages, results, and consequences of race are developed and constructed by human beings in society, not by some predetermined set of scientific laws or genetics. Genetically and biologically, individuals are more the same than they are different.

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related to race can help them build knowledge about themselves, their families, and others. Educators can encourage students to talk with their parents, grandparents, and other family members to help them build these insights.[4]

I have found that many educators tend to be "race-blind" in their classroom practices, which can make it difficult for them to recognize the many ways in which race and racism hinder learning opportunities and outcomes for students of color. By race-blind, I mean that educators avoid examining, thinking about, or acknowledging the ways in which race contributes to systems and structures of oppression and other forms of discrimination. Race-blind practices in schools include:

- Not recognizing the overwhelming number of black students referred to special education.
- Not recognizing the underwhelming number of black students referred to gifted education.
- Not recognizing that the majority of office referrals and consequent suspensions and expulsions are for black students.

Increased Significance of Race

Although some may believe issues of race are improving in the United States, one could argue that we are regressing as a nation. White supremacist organizations are bolder, more vocal, and more overt in their racist attacks than they were years ago. The violent protests in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017 are a case in point. Recent examples of the intensification of race and what might be considered racial divisiveness can be substantiated with the reactions to Colin Kaepernick's decision to exercise his right to kneel during the national anthem before NFL[5] games to protest the police killings of unarmed black people, such as Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Walter Scott. We also have seen an increase in media reports related to race, as white people call law enforcement on black people at appalling rates for seemingly mundane acts.

Inside of schools, we see continued trends that also point to the need to increase our focus on race. During the 2011–2012 school year, although black students represented only 18 percent of preschool enrollment, they made up 42 percent of the preschool students who were suspended once and 48 percent of those suspended more than once.[6] More current data show that although black students represented only 19.5 percent of preschool enrollment in 2013–2014, the year for which most recent data are available, they made up 48.6 percent of the preschool student population who were suspended once and 53.4 percent of those suspended more than once.[7]

Research shows that most office referrals originate in the classroom, and that African American students are more likely to be referred to the office for what have been described as more subjective infractions, while white students are more likely to be referred to the office for more objective ones.*[8] Moreover, research still shows that black students are not proportionately referred to gifted programs[9] and are overwhelmingly referred to special education for behavior challenges, compared with white students.[10] Although teachers tend to have good intentions, the point is that some of these practices result from implicit biases† that I believe teachers should work to address. Thus, to change these practices that are intentional or unintentional manifestations of discrimination, educators must become more aware of their implicit biases.

Yet, in spite of these findings, I have heard educators across the United States boast about the fact that they do not, have not, and will not address race in their talk, curriculum, and instructional practices, or in their work more broadly. In my analysis of their feedback, they share that (1) they believe race is inconsequential to their practices,[11] (2) they must focus on teaching math or English language arts for the upcoming state test,[12] (3) they believe we are living in a postracial society given that President Barack Obama served two terms,[13] or (4) they believe the issues they face are mostly about poverty and not race,[14] and not even the intersection of race and poverty.[15] But, I contend that to address some of the patterns of bias I've outlined both inside and outside of school, educators must build their knowledge to teach to, for, and through an understanding of race.

Building Teachers' Racial Knowledge

Research consistently finds that what teachers know manifests in what they actually teach.[16] In fact, one researcher[17] reminded us that it is difficult for any of us to teach what we do not know. Content knowledge researchers such as those who study math, science, social studies, or English language arts in education stress the need to deepen teachers' knowledge in these domains because they have found that teachers' practices are enhanced when they deeply understand their content. Knowledge related to subject matter disciplines has been classified as teachers' content knowledge. Relatedly, teachers' pedagogical content knowledge concerns the ways in which teachers understand their teaching of their content. In other words, teachers' pedagogical content knowledge consists of teachers' knowledge about their content and their ability to convey—that is, actually teach—that content to their particular students.[18]

Other forms of essential knowledge for teachers include their practical knowledge and their classroom knowledge.[19] For instance, one researcher explains that practical knowledge is shaped by "teachers' personal history, which includes intentions and pur-

*For more on racial disparities in school discipline, see "From Reaction to Prevention" in the Winter 2015–2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/skiba_losen.

†For more on implicit bias, see "Understanding Implicit Bias" in the Winter 2015–2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/staats.

poses, as well as the cumulative effects of life experience."[20] Another researcher[21] maintains that teachers make complex decisions that are not always connected to content knowledge. These complex decisions may not always seem logical, but teachers rely on their past practices to construct the most innovative learning environments for students. Teachers' practical knowledge allows them to develop a plan of action appropriate to particular situations, and they rely on what they have experienced in the past to help them make the most appropriate pedagogical moves.

Teachers' classroom knowledge allows them to examine the classroom[22] milieu and overall ethos of their classroom space. Classroom knowledge is not solely about the organization of a classroom, such as where desks are placed. Classroom knowledge focuses on who students are in the space and what materials are available to them, including human resources and capital.[23] That is, teachers' classroom knowledge reflects their understanding of the classroom setting, the school, and the community. Classroom knowledge allows teachers opportunities to make curricular and pedagogical decisions relevant to their environmental realities.

Elsewhere, I have described the racial knowledge teachers need[24] and also display in real classrooms[25] with students in order to address the structural and system imperatives I describe above, such as the over-referral of students of color to the office for punishment. By racial knowledge, I mean knowledge about societal and educational experiences and realities that are shaped and influenced by race, racism, and racist acts. This knowledge is informed by historical and contemporary moments that inform policies and practices inside and outside of school. However, educators building knowledge about race and racism is insufficient in the grand narrative of what it takes to transform schools into spaces of racial justice, where policies and practices are designed and enacted to cultivate fairness and equity. Ultimately, racial justice centers on leveling the playing field through equitable practices to provide opportunities and access for those who have been unfairly and unjustly treated. Educators need to be equipped to practice racial justice throughout the school day and across different social contexts.

Teachers work within organizational structures and systems that can either propel their knowledge or hinder it. Building racial knowledge requires educators to more deeply understand aspects of themselves and others, structures and systems, and mechanisms and practices that perpetuate and/or maintain the status quo. The research supports the idea that if teachers build racial knowledge in their pre-service teacher education programs, they can bolster that knowledge in their actual practices when they start teaching in-service.[26] Building racial knowledge requires teachers to rethink what they thought they understood previously; at times, educators may be frustrated by the process. But they understand that racial knowledge construction is lifelong work that can elevate over time. Because the experiences of individuals and society are dynamic, teachers must continue to probe and build insights about how race and racism operate both in and out of school. With increases in technology and shifts in popular culture, educators must consistently reflect on what is happening at particular moments in society and education. Thus, racial knowledge development in pre-service teacher education is likely insufficient for the kinds of learning and development teachers—especially white teachers—need to move their knowledge into practice. Features of constructing racial knowledge include:

- Studying the complex history of race. On college campuses, ethnic studies programs tend to offer important insights that traditional teacher education programs may be underprepared to offer.
- Critiquing and questioning white privilege and white supremacy.
- Examining how equity can improve the educational experiences of all students. Good examples include funding formulas in districts where per-pupil spending in schools varies significantly based on race.
- Interrogating how punitive disciplinary policies and practices, such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion, can actually do more harm than good by causing students to miss important instructional opportunities.
- Investigating alternative practices, such as restorative justice,[†] to resolve conflicts and help students and educators heal and work together.[§27]
- Listening to families and communities who are different from the mainstream culture and have mostly been silent in traditional programs that prepare teachers. Families and communities are the experts of their experiences, and when educators listen to their personal and collective stories and build on their strengths, they are better able to deepen their racial knowledge.

Racial knowledge requires educators to be in the trenches advocating for equity with and on behalf of their students.

- Recognizing and building insights about how to explicitly disrupt inequity. In other words, racial knowledge requires educators to be in the trenches advocating for equity with and on behalf of their students. This requires educators to actually do something to disrupt racism.
- Drawing from successful practices of educators who work with diverse students.**

Learning from Successful Educators

In observing the effective practices of teachers who understand the centrality of race and building relationships in their work, I have come to believe other teachers can learn from such practices. Several years ago, I observed Ms. Shaw, a black middle school social studies teacher who exhibited what I call *relationship-centered teaching*.[28] One day, Christine, a student in Ms. Shaw's fifth-period

[†]For more on restorative approaches to school discipline, see "Learning to Switch Gears" in the Winter 2015–2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/dubin.

[§]For more on building relationships, see "It's About Relationships" in the Winter 2015–2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/ashley.

**For more on working with students of color, see "The Need for More Teachers of Color" in the Summer 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/summer2015/vilson, and "The Case for a Teacher Like Me" in the Fall 2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/fall2016/preston.

class, walked into Ms. Shaw's second period with an assignment sheet from in-school suspension. Christine looked confused and sad, and it was obvious that she had been crying:

> Christine: Ms. Shaw, fill this [assignment sheet] out. They [the administration] put me in ISS [in-school suspension]. [Christine begins to cry.]
>
> Ms. Shaw: Christine, what's going on?
>
> Christine: I just don't like her [referring to one of her other teachers].
>
> Ms. Shaw: Well Christine, you will meet a lot of folks in your life you don't like. You've got to learn to work with people you don't like. It's going to be all right, though, because you are smart, and you've got to let that situation roll off your back.
>
> Christine: I knew you were going to say that, but I still don't like her.[29]

Language misunderstandings between teachers and students can hinder students' opportunities to learn.

Christine continued to look seriously troubled and hurt either by being sent to in-school suspension or by the situation she experienced with the teacher, whom she declared she "doesn't like." While gathering assignments to occupy Christine's time in suspension, Ms. Shaw studied the worried look on her student's face. Christine was clearly upset.

> Ms. Shaw: OK, Christine, sit down. Just hang out in here with me for a while. You don't need to go to suspension in this [mental] state. How are your sisters doing? You know I have taught all your older sisters, and you are all smart girls. What would Tonya say if she saw you all upset like this?
>
> Christine: She would tell me to calm down.
>
> Ms. Shaw: Exactly. Just shake off this situation, Christine. It is *so* not the end of the world. You will bounce back from this. How is Tonya?
>
> Christine: She is fine. She just got married.[30]

By the time Ms. Shaw finished posing questions to Christine about her sister and reassuring her that she was indeed "all right," Christine had calmed down. In fact, by the end of her exchange, Christine looked like a completely different person. She was now ready to move forward with her in-school suspension punishment. When I talked to Ms. Shaw about the interaction, she said she was worried that had she allowed Christine to leave her room in the state she was in, she would have run into even more problems and "trouble." She felt responsible for Christine while she was at school—not only when Christine was taking her class—and wanted to be sure she was in a space to move forward. Ms. Shaw was teaching in that moment with Christine and demonstrating relationship-centered pedagogy, although the interaction was not in a formal classroom setting. Ultimately, the point of this interaction is that any teacher—whether a teacher of color or not—could and should do what Ms. Shaw did to reduce the perpetual referral of black students, such as Christine, to the office.

Increasing and Nuancing Race Talk

We build our knowledge when we engage in conversation with others. Especially where race is concerned, teachers need to experience discussions about race at different times, in a range of locations, and with a diverse cadre of people. This talk about race should be both formal and informal, and it should run the gamut from academic to professional to social. Teachers need opportunities to talk about what they have experienced, what they have heard, what they have read, what they have seen, and how they have historically and presently experienced race and racism in their lives.

One of the most important texts about the intersections of race, talk, and teaching often used in teacher education programs to support prospective and practicing teachers' learning and development is Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*.[31] Although the book was published more than two decades ago, it is still relevant because Delpit's analysis centers on language, instructional moves, race, class, and power in ways that encourage teachers to reimagine what teaching and learning could and should be for all students. Delpit profoundly outlines differences in parental communication styles and cultural conflicts that can emerge in the classroom with mostly white teachers when outside-of-school realities, such as parenting styles, are not considered inside the school context. Other outside-of-school realities that have racial implications include gentrification; access to healthcare; toxins that students may interact with, such as lead paint; nutrition and quality of food; and parks and recreation centers available to students.

Language misunderstandings between teachers and students can also hinder students' opportunities to learn. For instance, in her book, Delpit stresses that she is not stereotyping any particular group of parents, students, or teachers. Rather, she explains the ways in which language and communication styles may be misunderstood in the classroom and how students—usually students of color—are penalized for communicative misunderstandings. For instance, if a black student is accustomed to more direct expectations at home, and if teachers have a more indirect way of communicating expectations at school, miscommunication can emerge. If a student is used to being told by an adult explicitly what is expected at home, and teachers take more indirect, implicit approaches in their requests, students, especially younger ones who have not yet learned how to navigate these different communicative environments, may have a difficult time making the adjustment. One researcher explained that "language is not an innocent reflection of how we think. The terms we use control our perceptions, shape our understanding, and lead us to particular proposals for improvement."[32] The point is not to generalize or stereotype but to understand that there are different ways of communicating that can put some students at a disadvantage in schools.

Curriculum and Instructional Practices Focused on Race

In teacher education programs, we need to prepare teachers to promote discussions of race across different content areas. Moreover, such discussion is not only about teaching a formal or informal cur-

riculum. It is also about taking care of students from diverse backgrounds and students of color, like the one Ms. Shaw helped. From the very beginning of the academic year, teachers can strive to design a classroom ethos that is open to questioning and hearing varying perspectives, and that expects and encourages discussion.* Establishing an environment of respect (even when conversations get heated) is essential to encouraging students to interrogate and grapple with tough issues in general and race conversations in particular.

Teachers can reflect on and balance their own views and positions on race and societal occurrences. The goal should not be to indoctrinate students into believing or embracing a particular point of view. Neither should the goal be to push their own agendas as much as it is to nuance points related to race with students in order to sharpen their analytical and critical-thinking skills. Teachers should offer counterviews to students' positions as they participate in classroom discussion. People often have different views and interpretations of the same experience. For instance, some see the killings of unarmed black men by police as just, because they believe law enforcement is always right. Others believe that law enforcement must be held accountable for violence against unarmed citizens.

In addition, teachers can identify and centralize the facts based on evidence from varying sources and multiple points of view.† They can encourage and require students to explore different sources of information and to consider positions and standpoints inconsistent with their initial thinking on topics related to race. Teachers should also expect students to draw from sources (including their own experience) in expressing their views and positions on issues of race.

Teachers cannot be expected to achieve all of the above without support. They must be prepared to engage in conversations on race as they emerge. They should be encouraged to build networks to support student needs that fall outside of their toolkit by working with school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and so forth. Teachers should recognize and nurture the affective and socioemotional dimensions of students. Students could feel very strongly about a racial topic or issue and could become emotional as conversations develop. Teachers should be supported to build knowledge and skills to acknowledge and validate these students' feelings, so they can respond to them with affirmation and sensitivity.

Teachers should learn how to talk to and partner with parents, community members, and school administrators about their views and expectations regarding race-centered conversations and develop strategies to bolster and complement discussion inside and outside of the classroom. To do this work, teachers must be supported in building knowledge and skills related to racial literacy.[33] Indeed, the work of race talk in the classroom involves joint commitment among faculty, staff, and students committed to engaging in tough conversations in order to improve their schools and hopefully (eventually) their communities and the world.

*For more on making elementary school classrooms LGBTQ-inclusive, see "Reading and Teaching the Rainbow" in the Spring 2019 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/spring2019/hermann-wilmarth_ryan.

†For more on fact-checking and providing evidence for arguments, see "The Challenge That's Bigger Than Fake News" in the Fall 2017 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/fall2017/mcgrew_ortega_breakstone_wineburg, and "For the Sake of Argument" in the Spring 2018 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/spring2018/friedrich_bear_fox.

Finally, once students have engaged with the issues and deepened their knowledge and understanding, teachers can help them consider their role in working against racism currently and in the future by thinking about broader ways to build conversations. In other words, what can students do to fight against discrimination and racism in the collective and beyond the walls of the school? Historically, teachers have fought for what they believe in. For instance, before the *Brown v. Board* decision in 1954, black educators collectively demonstrated their commitment to justice and equity by advocating for black students and their schools and by joining organizations established to fight racism, such as the NAACP.[34]

The work I describe here requires us to think seriously about teacher education programs. We cannot assume that teacher candidates have the time or the knowledge to prepare for discussing race on their own. As a result, teacher education programs must support teachers as they build the knowledge they need to lead productive conversations about race in the preK–12 classroom. While discussing race is difficult, we must encourage educators to talk about race not only for their own learning and development but also for the learning and development of their students. ☐

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Developing Inclusive Youth

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Group identity, though, along with negative messages from adults and the media, often perpetuates in-group preference, which fosters out-group dislike. It is of paramount importance to determine how best to reduce prejudice early in life, not only because by adulthood prejudice is deeply entrenched and difficult to change, but also for facilitating healthy development and motivating children to enjoy school and achieve academically. □

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(Continued from page 30)

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