What Schools Can Do to Increase Racial Acceptance?

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Although several articles of progress exist that indicate various levels of improvement in race relations in America—perhaps the most notable being the election of the country’s first African American president—the racism is far from over. News reports have highlighted the resurfacing of hate groups, and some even suggest that the political dissension that exists on Capitol Hill is directly correlated to the color of the President’s skin. This article looks at schools as one possible source of this problem and as a possible place for solutions. It includes a study done in three public schools in southeast Michigan that evaluated acceptance levels of African American teachers and White teachers of one another. The study showed that in their most personal and intimate actions, including dating, sharing confidences and sexual relations, neither group is accepting of each other. The article also gives some suggested approaches to improve relations between African American and White teachers.

Key Words: Racism, White privilege, teachers, Social Acceptance Scale, African American and White relations, racial acceptance

This was the first time in her life—the realization came as something of a shock... She had been alone with a mass of colored people in one of their places... It meant she had thrown away prerogatives she had always taken for granted, because they were as much a part of her as the [white] skin on her face.
(Pitts, 2012, p. 172)

Introduction

According to the Urban Dictionary (2002, p. 96) racism is,

The belief that some races are inherently superior (physically, intellectually, or culturally) to others and therefore have a right to dominate them. In the United States, racism, particularly by whites against blacks, has created profound racial tension and conflict in virtually all aspects of American society. Racism can be difficult for Whites to perceive. Peggy McIntosh (1998) calls this the backpack of privilege Whites carry. Denial of this condition by a majority of Whites does not change this reality; people of color do not have the same backpack of privilege as Whites, especially White males. There are Critical Race Theorists who further support this argument. Lisa Delpit (1988) proposes one aspect of power is, “Those with power are frequently least aware of it—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence” (p. 282). Similarly, Sabrina Vaught and Angelina Castagno (2008) assert, “Explore teacher attitudes towards race, racism, and White privilege in response to anti-bias in-service trainings in two major U.S. urban school districts through the theoretical lens of Critical Race
Theory” (p. 95). According to Vaught and Castagno whiteness, “is a concept that reflects the conflation of Whiteness with the exclusive rights to freedom, to the enjoyment of certain privileges, and to the ability to draw advantage from these rights” (p. 96).

Racism goes beyond privilege; it also includes hate. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SLPC),

Since 2000, the number of hate groups has increased by 69 percent. This surge has been fueled by anger and fear over the nation’s ailing economy, an influx of non-White immigrants, and the diminishing White majority, as symbolized by the election of the nation’s first African-American president. (SPLC, 2012, p. 1)

The scientific community has thrown out the biological concept of race in the last century. For those who have grown up in the United States of America, or who have been here long enough, however, the social construct of race between Blacks and Whites is more than evident. (For those who wish a detailed experience of a Black woman in America we suggest reading the six autobiographies of Maya Angelou found in The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou (2004) which starts with her book I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.)

If White families say it is okay to socialize with Blacks; work next to them; sit at bars alongside them; and even live next door, but say it is not okay for their teenage daughters to date African American males, we are not at the end of the tunnel of racism. If actions speak louder than words, then, it is only when we have close, interpersonal encounters have we moved beyond tolerance to full social acceptance. One path to acceptance may be found in an American institution almost everyone passes through, public schools.

**Thoughts and Research on Acceptance**

When discussing why Black kids sit together in the school cafeteria and White privilege, Beverly Tatum (2003) stated,

White people . . . don't always think about what it means to be white in a largely white-dominated society, sometimes struggle with the concept of white privilege. What are the benefits or the advantages to being white in a society that has historically given benefits and advantages to members of the dominant group? If you are a person who has that privilege, you don't necessarily notice it. It is sometimes taken for granted. Let's use the example of racial profiling. If you're driving on the highway and you are not randomly stopped, you don't get to the end of your drive and say, "Gee, I wasn't randomly stopped today." You just take for granted that you got in your car, drove to your destination, without incident, like you do most days. It's not something that you think of as a function of being a white person in this society, you know? (What is white privilege? section, para. 1)

Tatum (2003) gives an example,

If you go looking for an apartment and you find the apartment you like, and you rent it without difficulty, you don't say, "Gee, I benefited from being white today. I got that apartment I wanted." If you go shopping in the grocery store and find hair care products and make-up that work for you, you don't think, "Gee, I'm benefiting from being white today. (What is white privilege? section, para. 2)

Is working for acceptance worth the effort? In an article by Cassandra Willyard (2012),
researcher Janet Schofield believes it is worth it. She found Black and White roommates in their freshman year in college were more likely to develop friendships with people from different races and had reduced prejudice. Schofield is not talking only about having friends of a different race, but avoiding the prejudice of negative assumptions when, for example, accidental bumping into another assumes the worst when the other is of another race. Her answer is to look at and change school structures.

Changing school structure may seem too progressive or aggressive for some, but the Supreme Court in Grutter v. Bollinnger, 2003 supports diversity (Pearce, 2012). Writing for the [5-4] majority, Sandra Day O’Conner explained that “student body diversity is a compelling state interest” because it promotes “cross-racial understanding,” helps to dispel racial stereotypes, “promotes learning outcomes” and “better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce” (p. 22).

Teachers are a key in helping our country to understand racism and to diminish its effects. Pritchey Smith (1998) believes students do not remember teachers for the theories and facts they teach; rather they remember how teachers lived their personal lives. According to Smith, teachers should model a multicultural and multiracial lifestyle, their students can observe. It is important that they not only believe that interracial relationships are important, but teachers actually engage in interracial relationships. As Smith says, “Over the long term, what we teach may not be nearly as powerful as what we model” (p. 9).

While many studies, such as Taking America’s Pulse II Survey on Intergroup Relations (2000) and Taking America’s Pulse III (2005) both conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the National Conference for Community and Justice, report perceived levels of acceptance between Blacks and Whites, as well as other groups, no research until 2008 asked what are the levels of practiced acceptance (dating and other personal, intimate relationships) of Black and White teachers.

A Look at Teachers

In 2008, a Black man with the unique name of Barack Obama was nominated to and won the office of President of the United States. The same year a doctoral student, Dania Haidous—with the assistance of her advisor—constructed a Social Acceptance Scale (SAS), which was derived from the Social Acceptance Framework (see Appendix), to be given to high school teachers in Michigan: one urban, one suburban and one exurban high school. Haidous (2009) stated the purpose of her study was to develop a reliable Social Acceptance Scale (SAS) that could be used with teachers to measure social acceptance of Black and White teachers to open lines of communication and improve interracial relationships.

The SAS (Haidous, 2009) has 22 questions plus three demographic items. Assuming intimate relationships are the strongest indicator of acceptance, this article deals with the last three questions based on Level 5 of the Acceptance Framework (slightly edited here):

1. I have dated people of another race.
2. I have shared intimate secrets with people of another race.
3. I have had sexual relationships with people of another race.

The possible responses were (with their scale scores): (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3), Sometimes, or (4) Frequently.

The SAS was administered to 56 Black teachers and 86 White teachers for a total of 142 teachers from distinctly different high schools in southeast Michigan, one urban, one suburban
and one exurban. In the population sample of teachers, 100% of the teachers in the exurban school were White, about 25% were White in the urban school and the suburban school was 12% Black; near the national average of 13%.

On the first question, *I have dated people of another race*; Whites had an average response of 1.49, averaging between Never (1) and Rarely (2). On the other hand, Black teachers had an average response of 1.88; closer to Rarely than Whites, but not by much. There does not seem to be much dating between the races by teachers. The second question, *I have shared intimate secrets with people of another race*, the average response for Whites was 2.33, averaging between Rarely (2) and Sometimes (3); Blacks scored 2.45 on average, closer to Sometimes. Again, Blacks had higher acceptance, by sharing confidences, but not by much. The last question, *I have had sexual relationships with people of another race*, the most intimate question on the SAS, had an average response for Whites of 1.40, almost Never (1) while Blacks averaged 1.57, slightly closer to Rarely (2). Not much intimate contact seems to exist between teachers of different races.

From the results of the survey, one can see that Black and White teachers rarely date, share secrets, or have close sexual relationships with the other race in their personal lives, past, or present. While one does not want to prescribe who shall date whom, with whom to have personal conversations or intimate relations, the data seems to tell us Black and White teachers are not emotionally close to each other. If teachers are role models for our students and our society, we have a long way to go, both Black and White to be truly accepting of each other.

### What Can Schools Do?

A few suggestions to improve relations between Black and White teachers as well as between students are:

- Schools or school districts can have open enrollments to encourage students from different locales and cultural groups to attend and increase diversity.
- In the same vein, schools and school districts can recruit faculty and staff with an eye towards diversity; sometimes called affirmative action.
- Assuming some diversity in the staff, faculty from a single school should be encouraged to get together (party on a Friday night) or to have at least structured annual retreats with the main objective to get to know each other better.
- Teach about what is obvious to one race, but not to another, White privilege.

Beverly Tatum, in a conversation on school curriculum suggests,

Most schools teach about slavery, and for many black students that's a point of real discomfort. Their experience of that is that the teacher's talking about slavery and all the white kids in the class are looking at us, to see what our reaction is. I'm certainly not suggesting we shouldn't teach about slavery, but I think it's important to teach it in an empowering way. Teachers need to focus on resistance to victimization. Students of color need to see themselves represented not just as victims but as agents of their own empowerment…You can talk about Sojourner Truth, you can talk about Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, . . .(as cited in O’Neil, 1997, p.15).

Tatum continues to explain:

At the same time, we think white children need to be helped to understand how racism operates. Inevitably, when you talk about racism in a predominantly white society,
you generate feelings of discomfort and often guilt among white people because they might feel that you're saying that white people are bad...In these discussions, we need to include examples of white people as agents of change. Teach students about the abolitionists . . . the Civil Rights movement. All children need to learn about those white folks who worked against oppression. Unfortunately, many white students don't have that information (as cited in O’Neil, 1997, p. 16).

As Dania Haidous (2009) proposes,

…that teachers’ initiate relationships with people of another race. It should be understood that having a positive attitude towards social acceptance should not be considered a substitute for actual social interaction. It may help them be a better educator and not only might they personally benefit from their new relationships and new found insight but so may their students and their school. (p. 80)

Haidous (2009) continues,

Acceptance is a necessary component to teaching and treating students fairly. White teachers should participate in social activities with blacks as they do with other white teachers. By doing this they will begin to break down the social wall that exists between the two groups. It is important to remember that this separation keeps either side from developing a deeper understanding of one another. If white teachers do not understand their black students it will be difficult to relate to them in a classroom and address their needs. This could pose as a barrier to effective teaching and learning in the classroom. (p. 80)

**A Look Into The Future**

About 15% of all new marriages in the United States in 2010 were between spouses of a different race or ethnicity from one another, more than double the share in 1980 (6.7%). Among all newlyweds in 2010, 9% of whites, 17% of blacks, 26% of Hispanics and 28% of Asians married out (Wang, 2010). While these are newer marriages, it does indicate a trend towards closer, more intimate relationships between Blacks and Whites as well as other ethnic groups. There may be hope for the future. Maybe White families are starting to allow their daughters to date Black men. Maybe younger adults and children see what is important, both Blacks and Whites gain when they accept each other. Maybe, as Peggy McIntosh, Beverly Tatum and others have long suggested, now educators can start to implement curricula to rethink race and ethnicity.
References


Web-Based References

Haidous, D. (2009). Construction and administration of a social acceptance scale for black and white teachers in southeast Michigan (Doctoral Dissertation) Available from Digital Commons@Wayne State University.


Appendix

Social Acceptance Framework

In this framework, *others* is defined as those you perceive to be different from yourself; those who come from a different cultural reference group, sex (or sexual orientation) or race. Race is used here. Assuming you are White, your level of acceptance of Blacks is demonstrated by:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Acceptance of Others</th>
<th>At Work you will</th>
<th>Socially you will</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>No contact</td>
<td>Work only at an all white company or at one where blacks hold only the lowest jobs</td>
<td>Live, shop and see only whites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Only very incidental contact</td>
<td>Work where blacks are employed, but not comfortable if in the same department or work area</td>
<td>Live, shop and see only whites except on very rare occasions (must go to event in the city).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Some proximity</td>
<td>Work alongside blacks; limited conversations, only related to work.</td>
<td>Will eat in restaurants or attend other public, social gatherings where blacks are also expected to attend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Social contact</td>
<td>Work alongside blacks; conversations are related to work plus personal issues such as family. Will attend business social functions where blacks are also expected to attend</td>
<td>Attend private social functions hosted by black families or where they are also invited; live in mixed race neighborhoods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Close friends</td>
<td>Have black co-workers to your house for dinner or a party.</td>
<td>Will have black friends over to dinner. Allow (encourage) your children to play with or date blacks. Very close friends will discuss sensitive issues like racism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Enjoy physical &amp; social intimacy</td>
<td>Comfortably greet your black colleagues with a handshake or a hug when appropriate. Discuss the same sensitive issues you would with white friends.</td>
<td>Will date a black person; share intimate secrets, with the possibility of marriage, have children.</td>
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Authors’ Bios

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