

# Learning and Unlearning Racism: Challenging the Hidden Curriculum of Schooling

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*The minute something goes wrong at the school, the first people that get looked at are all the Black boys (Howard, 2008, p. 971).*

The above quote appears in a study of Black adolescent males' perceptions of their school experiences. In the study, Howard (2008) documents perspectives that suggest the failure and misbehavior of African American youth are "business as usual" in today's schools. The boys in the study related their perspectives that teachers expect them to be good in athletics not academics, expect them to get in trouble, give them harsher punishments than White students, and tend to view them as disrespectful. We imagine that Trayvon Martin, given his history of school suspensions, would have heartily agreed with his peers' views. These kinds of pervasive experiences of schooling, often called the "hidden" curriculum, explicitly teach and reinforce racism and racial stereotypes that lead to an unexamined fear of Black boys such as that manifested by George Zimmerman, who perceived that a Black adolescent in his neighborhood implied a threat to the safety of the neighborhood.

To be sure, we must not lay the blame for the persistence of racism in the U.S. at the classroom door, as school is only one of the several systems in which an individual interacts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). "Microsystems," such as schools, are nested within larger systems such as the socio-historical circumstances in which schools are situated. Permeable borders between systems guarantee that the beliefs and practices of individuals in schools are shaped by their experiences outside of school. Noguera (2008) explains, "The stereotypical images we hold toward groups are powerful in influencing what people see and expect of students. Unless educators consciously try to undermine and work against these kinds of stereotypes, they often act on them unconsciously" (p. 11). Thus, while racism is typically reproduced and reinforced in schools, schools can become sites for the unlearning of racism.

To understand how schools contribute to the learning of racism, many education scholars assert the importance of broadening conventional "understandings of curriculum beyond the visible materials teachers present in their classrooms to include less visible curricular structures, processes, and discourses" (Yosso, 2002, p. 93). Through this "hidden curriculum," schools become sites in which racial stereotypes are learned and reinforced (Noguera, 2008).

Here we lift the cover from the hidden curriculum of racism by looking into examples of structures and discourses commonly in place in U.S. schools that reinforce and actively teach negative stereotypes about Black youth and particularly about Black boys. These lessons, learned through the hidden curriculum lead White citizens like George Zimmerman to believe a young

Black male, like Trayvon Martin, is a threat to his gated community. In the final section, we present implications for policy and practice that could change these patterns.

### **Learning Racism through School Structures**

School structures are policies and practices that are in place in schools and often barely noticed because they are accepted as “normal” (Kumashiro, 2008). Structures include, for example, the ways in which students are assigned to classes (e.g., gifted, advanced placement, special education), grouped within classes (high, average, and low groups), and disciplined (e.g., zero tolerance policies). Typically and persistently, the number of Black students in lower level groups is greater than the number of White students, while the reverse is true in high-level groups (Losen, 1999; Farkas, 2003). Although a thorough examination of the reasons for these race-linked groupings is beyond the scope of this paper, the hidden curriculum of grouping practices sheds light on the racial learning in schools.

While so-called ability groupings are common in schools, the lessons that these structures communicate to students, teachers and administrators are less recognized. Grouping practices segregate students according to their perceived abilities. Often, the only time they see students in the other groups is during lunch or an art or physical education class. Research has repeatedly shown that students assigned to the same group are more likely to become friends than those in different groups (Kubitschek & Hallinan, 1998). The segregation of students from one another, which begins increasingly earlier due to the pressure of high-stakes accountability testing, all but ensures the reinforcement of stereotypes students are exposed to in the media and in their communities. School structures that segregate students from one another ensure that students are constantly reminded of their place in the academic, social, and racial hierarchy. In his examination of the plight of Black boys in U.S. schools, Noguera explained, “In the United States we have very deeply embedded stereotypes that connect racial identity to academic ability, and children become aware of these stereotypes as they grow up in the school context” (p. 10).

When we consider the powerful lessons taught through grouping structures, we have little difficulty answering Tatum’s question: Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria (2002)? Other groups of students also cluster in their own cafeteria islands. In short, simply attending the same schools does not guarantee that Black and White students will develop knowledge of and respect for one another. In fact, researchers consistently have noted that prejudice reduction relies on interpersonal contact among people with similar status in pursuit of common goals (Dessel, 2010; Utsey, Ponterotto & Porter, 2008). This kind of substantive contact is unlikely to occur in schools where students are assigned to a “track” and typically remain in that track over time (Donelan, Neal, & Jones, 1994).

The widespread implementation of zero-tolerance policies is another structure that communicates race-based messages about students. Although discipline policies are intended to ensure student safety, school personnel seldom recognize or examine racial differences in how disciplinary decisions are made (Tarca, 2005). Numerous classroom researchers have uncovered differential treatment of students as explanations for racial disproportionality in discipline (e.g., Bowditch, 1993; Ferguson, 2000; Skiba, et al., 2000; Vavrus & Cole, 2002; Wallace et al., 2008). In their large-scale study, Skiba and colleagues (2000) explored disciplinary records of

over 11,000 middle school students and found that Black students were subject to a higher number of office referrals from teachers, and were referred for more subjectively defined behaviors such as “disrespect” and “excessive noise.” Their findings revealed that Blacks were disciplined more severely than their White counterparts for less serious infractions. Ferguson’s (2000) ethnographic study in one elementary school revealed that teachers’ interpretations of Black students’ language and expressions as defiant or disruptive were often grounded in stereotypes and fear common in the larger American culture. Thus, teachers’ interpretations of behavior influence whether students are identified for sanctions (Ferguson, 2000; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). In fact, zero tolerance policies played a role in the suspension of Trayvon Martin for a nonviolent behavioral infraction, a suspension that put him in the wrong place at the wrong time and with fatal consequences. The racial discipline gap, first exposed in 1975 (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975), repeatedly sends messages to students about who is good, bad, and really bad. As Noguera (2008) has explained, “As schools sort children by perceived measures of ability and as they single out certain children for discipline, implicit and explicit messages about racial... identities are conveyed” (p. 30). These most often reinforce rather than counter patterns in society at large.

### **Learning Racism through School Discourses**

School discourses are the dominant ways of talking about teaching, learning, and doing school. As is the case with school structures, school discourses are so embedded in everyday practice that they can be hard to see. To illustrate the potential power of a dominant school discourse, we consider the concept of “colorblindness.”

As Williams (2011) described in a widely read article in *Psychology Today*, colorblindness is a widespread approach to addressing racial issues by treating people as individuals. On the surface, Williams points out, colorblindness seems like a good thing and is reminiscent of Dr. Martin Luther King’s call to judge people on the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. Many Americans view colorblindness as helpful to people of color by asserting that race does not matter (Tarca, 2005). Yet, as Williams has explained, there are serious flaws to the colorblind approach, which in the end operates as a form of racism. Williams notes:

But in America, most underrepresented minorities will explain that race does matter, as it affects opportunities, perceptions, income, and so much more. When race-related problems arise, colorblindness tends to individualize conflicts and shortcomings, rather than examining the larger picture with cultural differences, stereotypes, and values placed into context. .... White people can guiltlessly subscribe to colorblindness because they are usually unaware of how race affects people of color and American society as a whole. (Williams, 2011, Colorblindness is not the Answer, para 1)

Tarca (2005) summarizes the damaging consequences of colorblind discourse. She notes that the absence of conversation about race stunts the growth of cross-race understanding and actually reinforces the use of stereotyped explanations for school behavior and achievement that blame individuals and their families. If educators continue to blame Black students and families for the achievement and discipline gaps, they will be unable to address the root causes which are

more closely related to unequal access to health care, high quality education, and economic well being and more importantly, unlikely to critically examine their own roles in suppressing Black achievement. When institutions “shun racially informed decision-making” (p. 112), the pervasive influence of race in schools and society stays underground, and those who recognize the role of discrimination and implicit stereotypes in school decision-making cannot argue their case. Or perhaps worse, they are viewed as “playing the race card,” or labeled as racists themselves.

The silence about race in schools is part of the hidden curriculum experienced by George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin. And by failing to recognize race, teachers convey diminished regard for students of color, as was conveyed by a Black parent to her child’s White kindergarten teacher in this quote:

What you value, you talk about...My children are black. They don’t look like your children. They know they’re black and we want it recognized. It’s a positive difference, an interesting difference, a comfortable natural difference. At least it could be so, if you teachers learned to value differences more. What you value, you talk about. (Paley, 2000, p. 12)

By segregating students and avoiding conversations about race, schools implicitly and explicitly reinforce the lessons students learn by observing their world in and out of school (Noguera, 2008). Students learn that “the students who are most likely to be punished, suspended, and expelled...are more likely to be the darker students” (p. 12). In fact, in some contexts, as Black students begin to learn that “in this society to be Black or Brown means to be ‘less than’—whether it be less smart, less capable, or less attractive—they often express a desire to be associated with the dominant or more powerful group” (Noguera, 2008, p. 7). The unfortunate reality of schools is that race is seldom addressed substantively or critically within the curriculum (Castagno, 2008; Thompson, 2004) and when race is not addressed, schools reinforce deeply embedded American stereotypes that link race to intelligence, behavior, morality, economic potential, and civility. It is not surprising to find teachers and students acting unconsciously, yet destructively, on those stereotypes when a colorblind discourse prevails.

Unlike George Zimmerman, most Americans do not react to young Black male in their neighborhood with physical violence; however, societal and school factors create a culture that builds stereotypes about Black boys in all of us. As we have explained, schools contribute to this in two ways. First, school structures reinforce these stereotypes through structural arrangements such as tracking, ability grouping, zero tolerance policies, and the implementation of standardized accountability without supplemental resources necessary to combat achievement disparities. Second, school personnel communicate tacit acceptance of stereotypes about Black boys through their colorblind discourse and their unexamined assumptions and actions. This failure to work against racially biased societal messages increases their power (Noguera, 2009) and for many, Black and White, the implicit messages about Black youth become the officially accepted “truth.”

## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The problems described above are vast, and the failure to address them is further evidence of how deeply racism is embedded in our culture. Yet, there are things schools can and should do at the levels of policy and practice, to make it less likely that the next George Zimmerman acts on the basis of unexamined prejudice, stereotype, and fear. In our recommendations, we focus on strategies that will increase positive intergroup interactions and reduce prejudice. In this brief paper, we do not provide a comprehensive view of possible policies and practices but focus instead on a few that we believe hold promise.

### **Policy Recommendation: Eliminate Test-Based Reform and Zero Tolerance Policies**

Tarca (2005) notes that current educational policy makers shun race-based decision-making and argues that they must not only acknowledge issues of race but also actively embrace race-conscious policy. For this to happen, a radical shift in educational policy is necessary. Currently, reform policy at all levels is grounded in test-based accountability. Yet as Howard (2008) notes, these reforms simply “sort and stratify students in the name of reform” (p. 978) and despite decades of such reforms have had little impact on addressing the achievement or discipline gap. Additionally, these reforms which have decreased equal status and cross-race contact and which position Black youth and particularly Black boys as “less than,” teach and reinforce stereotypes about Black youth, their intelligence, their motivation, their behavior, and their potential. For this reason, we recommend that policy makers suspend all test-based school reform efforts and use funding incentives to encourage development of programs designed to address racial disparities in school discipline and school achievement. We want to stress that we are not suggesting schools should not be accountable for student learning and achievement. We are, however, suggesting that reform driven by testing is undermining rather than advancing educational equity. We recommend two funding priorities.

First, provide funding incentives for schools to eliminate zero tolerance policies (Noguera, 2008). As noted above, decisions about which students are punished and how they are punished are influenced by teachers’ racial assumptions and stereotypes. Zero tolerance policies have not reduced violence and misbehavior in schools, but they are associated with increased use of punishments for Black youth (Noguera, 2008). As an alternative, we suggest national policy should encourage schools to develop and evaluate the impact of innovative programs that create stronger connections between children, youth, families, and school. To be funded, school districts should develop programs that include two critical components: a) strategies that teach the school’s behavioral expectations and connect students to adults and schools (e.g., mentoring, counseling, conflict resolution programs) (Noguera, 2008) and b) strategies for addressing the implicit prejudice and cultural assumptions of school board members, teachers, and district and building level administrators (Tarca, 2005). The second component requires the expertise of experienced consultants, external to the school system, who can help educators learn to critically examine their own assumptions about White privilege and why being colorblind is counter-productive (Jay, 2009; Tarca, 2005; Utsey, Ponterotto & Porter, 2008). Interpersonal contact across racial groups is important but insufficient in prejudice reduction. Active prejudice reduction activities are required at all levels of the system in order for schools to create the conditions necessary to enhance positive interactions across racial groups (Dessel, 2010).

Second, provide funding incentives to design and implement alternatives to the structures schools currently use to sort students into courses, programs, and schools in ways that segregate student populations, impede equal status interpersonal contact across races, and create disparities in access to academic resources (Noguera, 2008). These might include: designing alternatives to ability grouping and tracking, designing alternatives to grade retention, and creating incentives for affluent parents to send their children to schools that are diverse at the classroom level. Evaluation of the impact of such alternatives should examine progress in reducing disparities in achievement by examining data (disaggregated by race and class) on: the number of children who are over-age for grade, the number of children assigned to primarily single race schools/classrooms, the number of children assigned to honors and advanced placement classes/programs, and the number of children graduating from high school in four years.

### **Implications for Changes in School Practices**

Radical policy change is needed, but policy is political, and political change is slow. While state and national race-conscious political leaders work for race-conscious policy, school administrators and teachers can move forward with race-conscious practice that will make a difference now in classrooms across the country. Our recommendations focus on strategies for prejudice reduction among those who work most closely with our youth, and on strategies they can use to enhance the educational success of all students, help youth feel more connected to teachers and schools, and increase positive cross-race interactions among youth. The following guidelines, while not comprehensive, would help us take major steps forward.

#### *Strategies for White Administrators*

*Open yourself to learning from Black colleagues and authors.* Howard (2008) notes that acts of racism by educators are often “innocent, subtle, and transparent but harmful nonetheless” (p. 973) because they are repeated daily across varied classrooms, and levels of schooling. Because these acts and the assumptions that underlie them are implicit, educators are often unable to see them. A critical first step for administrators is to lead through the example of becoming reflective about their assumptions about Black educators, parents and students. Jay (2009) suggests administrators actively work to counter any initial tendencies to dismiss concerns related to race that are raised by colleagues, families, and students. Howard (2008) suggests that another way to help open educators’ eyes is for faculties to read literature that increases their race consciousness and challenges their perspectives that African American youth come to school with deficits that impede school success (Ladson Billings, 2007). Literature that might be used includes: Delpit (2006), Howard (2010), Ladson-Billings (2007), Noguera (2008), Rousseau and Dixson (2006), and Wolk (2011).

A second powerful strategy is to *work with teachers to identify how the hidden curriculum of the school reifies differences among students* rather than breaking down stereotypes and prejudices (Dessel, 2010; Noguera, 2001) and facilitating high achievement for all (Delpit, 2006; Ladson Billings, 2007). When students of equal status work together on valued projects where each student is able to contribute positively, stereotypes and prejudices are reduced (Dessel, 2010; Utsey, Ponterotto, & Porter, 2008). Yet, as we have noted, unexamined formal and informal practices tend to separate students (e.g., tracking, ability grouping).

Administrators can work with teachers to help them recognize and critically examine how the informal patterns within the school influence teacher, student, and family options. In this way teacher and student assumptions about individual choice, motivation, or ability are less likely to be used to assign blame for student achievement and behavior, and teachers are more likely to work collectively to find strategies for scaffolding students toward success.

### *Strategies for Teachers*

Research on prejudice reduction indicates that students must work in cross-racial groups where they have equal status and common goals, that teachers must assign tasks that require cooperation and the contribution of each member, and that teachers must reinforce positive interactions (Dessel, 2010; Noguera, 2008; Utsey et al., 2008). However, ensuring these interactions occur requires more than placing students in cross-racial groups and creating well structured cooperative learning tasks, although these steps are certainly important. Teachers must confront their implicit assumptions and unconscious actions through the kinds of dialogue suggested above. Additionally, they must change their practices in order to alter classroom structures, the ways they interact with students, and the curriculum in order to provide a counter narrative to the marginalization of people of color that happens in our country (Yosso, 2002). Without this, equal status interaction and therefore prejudice reduction is unlikely. Two strategies, which would involve comprehensive change in classrooms, are suggested.

First, teachers must *approach texts and the overall curriculum with a critical eye for what is left out, under-emphasized, and glossed over* in order to provide a more inclusive curriculum and to facilitate explicit and developmentally appropriate conversations about race. Issues related to racism, social justice, civil rights, oppression, and contributions of people of color are either omitted or under-emphasized in textbooks (Dessel, 2010). When these issues are not discussed in school, White youth develop the belief that color no longer matters and that differences in school and life success reflect differences in ability and effort (Howard, 2008). While many children of color know this is not true (Howard, 2008), others absorb the implicit message that it is inevitable that they will be “less than” middle class, White peers (Delpit, 2006). African American educators argue persistently that teachers must provide a counter-narrative to stereotyped views of the competence and worth of children of color in order to convey high expectations, challenge societal stereotypes, and nurture them toward high achievement (e.g. Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2001; Ladson Billings, 2007; Noguera, 2008). This is equally important for other members of the classroom community if they are to learn to question the racial lessons communicated pervasively by society, school structures, and the media.

The second recommendation for teachers is to *learn and use culturally responsive pedagogy* to facilitate the academic accomplishment of children of color (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Powell & Rightmyer, 2011). When children are able to see the brilliance of all their peers, racial prejudice about competence and ability is undermined. Unfortunately, the current emphasis on test-based accountability suggests learning is culture-free which exacerbates perceptions that children of color are unable to meet the standard. However, all children can and will meet high standards when teachers learn to use culturally responsive pedagogy that builds on children’s cultural assets, consistently and appropriately conveys positive regard and high expectations for children, demands critical thinking, provides

curriculum that critically examines issues of race in our country and communicates the contributions of all members of our society, and includes culturally congruent teaching practices.

All members of our society play a role in either accepting or countering existing stereotypes about the intelligence, behavior, accomplishments, and effort of children of color. We all play a role in creating the fear and stereotypes that drive the actions of people like George Zimmerman. That fear and prejudice endangers Black youth and impacts their chances of success in school and beyond. That fear and prejudice impacts and diminishes all of us and undermines the pursuit of liberty and equality that is the foundation of our democracy. Schools bear a special responsibility in moving toward race-conscious decision-making. However, schools are mired in test-based reform efforts that imply the work and worth of our youth are being “objectively measured.” Many educators fear that this will be exacerbated by the current national acceptance of common core standards that focus on the content to be learned without regard to the children to be taught (Ravitch, 2013). Collectively, we must demand more of the national policy driving educational reform and more of those leading our schools.

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