Identity-Affirming Schools Need Race-Conscious Educators

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Why did you enter the field of education? No matter your years of experience or journey, you can count on someone who will ask you to reflect on your "why." A majority of professionals unpack their *why* with narratives of positive educational experiences or an inspirational teacher. I feel awkward during those moments because, when given the opportunity to speak my truth, the conversation shifts drastically.My pathway into education was not ignited by what teachers *did for me*, but rather by what those who were responsible for my growth and learning *did not do* and the lack of intentionality to create an identity-affirming environment. As a Black student, I attended an elementary school that lacked racial diversity. I did not see many students or any teacher who looked like me. There was not a space for dialogues about humanity in ways that would foster global consciousness. A diversity of literature depicting Indigenous, Black, or people of color was not accessible, and textbooks presented a singular story steeped in Eurocentric worldviews. My school's educators failed to understand how identity validation and inclusive environments are catalysts to students' success. I struggled to feel seen. How can educational leaders claim that schools demonstrate excellence if equity is not at the forefront of systems, policies, or pedagogical practices?

Three decades later, I serve as a chief equity and inclusion officer and work with K–12 students, teachers, and educational leaders to create spaces that foster belonging and dismantle systems that maintain marginalization. In my district, student clubs such as the Student Alliance for Equity, Black Student Union, Future Black Leaders, Latino Student Alliance, and Muslim Student Association talk about the root causes of cultural disconnections. Through their conversations, I have been reminded of my childhood and try to amplify their voices to ensure that racially and ethnically diverse students feel visible.

1) The Colorblind Approach Is Damaging

When we assert that we see all students as the same, we dehumanize and discount their experiences, perspectives, and identities. Racial experiences are real, and the classroom can be a space where all students unpack the impact of implicit bias, microaggressions, and systemic racism. Race-conscious educators must embrace discomfort. We need to examine our beliefs and the experiences that shape how we respond to others, but courageous conversations about cultural and racial differences do not happen by chance.

To have these conversations in my school community, we have formed Racial Dialogue Circles with administrators, teachers, and families that engage small groups around race. The series ends with a community action plan for racial equity. Many of our teachers and administrators also participate in Undoing Racism trainings to combat colorblindness. If we can acknowledge that people have different experiences within the same community, we can be cognizant of the power structures that create variance within students' school experiences.

2) Disproportionalities Send a Message to Students

Teachers analyze achievement gaps and data pertaining to disciplinary referrals and exceptional learners. However, we don't often reflect on systems, biases, and practices we have created that breed inequitable outcomes.

Students have reminded me that disproportionalities in the data communicate how educational leaders value equity and foster stereotype threats, which are a contributing factor of racial and gender achievement gaps. When students of color are overidentified for special education services and disciplinary referrals and not in advanced placement (AP) or high-ability courses, the visible disproportionality conditions people to adopt stereotypical beliefs about Black and Brown students' behaviors and intelligence. Instead of delving into the origins of unbalanced outcomes, there is a tendency to initiate a "how to fix students of color" conversation. It is easier to make a student the scapegoat for low performance rather than question the delivery of instruction or relational issues. When I ask students of color to share their insight regarding the lack of representation in AP courses, I often hear stories related to self-doubt, discouragement from peers who lack confidence in their own capabilities, or how an adult convinced them to consider a "manageable" academic load. Students of color can sense deficit thinking and need to see leaders taking steps to eradicate barriers.

Students tell me that teachers give them fist bumps in the hallways every day, but that does not equate to a relationship. To have a relationship is to understand and disrupt the structural barriers. Representation matters, and when it is lacking, we have to question the cause.

3) Singular Stories Are Dangerous

My childhood school experience reflects the same historical content that many students are still spoon-fed today. It is difficult to understand your identity, cultural diversity, and parallels between the past and present when history is taught from a Eurocentric worldview. When students of racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds are not able to learn about their history, they are forced to function within an oppressive environment absent of multiple perspectives.

Numerous textbooks fail to emphasize multicultural perspectives. Researcher Geneva Gay asserts that textbooks offer a narrow focus on African Americans in comparison to other ethnic groups and use partial accounts of slave trade and selective chronicles of social activism to create a contrived pathway to equality. Students might be familiar with the story of Dr. Martin Luther King but never learn the work of Ella Baker or Fred Shuttlesworth.

In 2019, we should not have to subject elementary students into dressing up as pilgrims and Indigenous people to capture a singular story. Students want to see cultural studies as course requirements, not electives. Importantly, students of color want teachers to be aware when perspectives are missing and include supplemental resources, texts, and experts who share counter-stories. Who is recognized? Who is forgotten? We owe our students a culturally responsive education that doesn't skew history.

4) Students Want to Be Heard

It is imperative to give students opportunities to be a part of the change they would like to see. We need to understand what school looks like through their eyes, what drives connections to the classroom environment, and what causes students to disengage.

I openly discuss systems of support with students and the ways in which school officials or policies have fallen short. I don't collect narratives to file away in a drawer; they shape the way I develop learning experiences for school leaders. For instance, when I conduct equity-related trainings for teachers, administrators, and community partners, I discuss racial microaggressions and the impact they have

on the mental health of students of color; <u>racism and implicit bias cause high anxiety</u> as well as depression.

When I talk to students of color about their emotional health, I learn that their anxieties typically stem from the lack of an identity-affirming environment where racial experiences are acknowledged. It's important to provide a space for students to share living experiences, whether through student clubs or focus groups. Ask students in what ways they feel seen or heard and how you can collectively create an environment that honors their identity.

5) Accountability Makes a Difference

As educators, we strive to have relationships with students, but we must recognize that relationships are not only about niceness. If we neglect to validate racial identities, omit multiple perspectives, and uphold disparities, our actions will convey a different message about our intentions and the connections we want to establish. We can create safe and brave spaces for students if we strive to see the world through their lens. To understand our bias (from which no one is exempt), the <u>Harvard Implicit Bias Test</u>, tips for <u>immersion in outside perspectives</u>, and Sara Ahmed's book *Being the Change* can be helpful tools.

Before we can begin to understand the humanity of others, we have to understand our own identity and the ways we have been socialized to interact with the world. We all play a critical part in developing identity-safe spaces that affirm learners and their racial experiences. The work never stops.