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EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES:

Facilitating Race Talk in the Classroom: Lessons from Student Experiences

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PART I: CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO RACE TALK IN THE CLASSROOM



Racial socialization, the process through which individuals learn about race and racism in society (Hughes et. al, 2006), begins in early childhood and continues throughout development. As young people try to make sense of the abundance of messages they receive about race (from home, friends, school, the media, etc.), nurturing spaces that allow them to unpack their racialized experiences are key for positive racial identity development and overall well-being. Not only do educators have a responsibility to provide such spaces for youth, but would also be remiss not to provide opportunities for students to critically examine how race and racism affects their lives. Scholars in the field of education have argued that effectively

facilitated race talk can have numerous positive benefits for youth including: (a) increased communication skills and learning (Sue, 2013); (b) increased racial literacy (Howard, 2004; Sue, 2013); (c) deepened critical consciousness of one's own racial identity (Sue, 2013; Taylor, 2013); (d) increased perspective-taking skills (Howard & Denning del Rosario, 2000); and (e) greater preparedness for democratic citizenship (Howard & Denning del Rosario, 2000). Though the need for race talk in schools is imperative and the learning opportunities vast, for both students and teachers, this important work does not come without challenges. A lack of care and attention to the ways in which classrooms are set up to support or inhibit racial dialogue can thwart efforts to engage in productive racial discussion and may do more harm than good. This brief addresses two concerns related to race talk in the classroom: (1) challenges and barriers for students, in particular high school aged youth, in talking about race; and (2) some tips and suggestions for educators who want to facilitate effective race talk.

Williams, Woodson, and Wallace (2016, p. 18) describe classroom race talk as "when students and educators exchange stories

about meanings and feelings associated with race and racism in their lives (Sue, 2013).” Such dialogue is deeply personal and has the potential to garner strong emotional reactions (e.g., guilt, fear, frustration, shame, and anger) from students of all racial/ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, the public nature of classroom discussions makes race talk particularly risky for students as their decisions to speak up (or not) can have significant consequences on their relationships with peers, their own self-esteem, and even their grades. Take for example the following quote from Tanya, a white, female, 11th grade student describing her experiences with race talk, “It’s a really – it’s like it’s something that’s going on currently, and everyone has different views, and everyone has been affected differently. So talking about those kind of situations and the things that are happening, everyone’s had a different experience. So it’s a little more of a tougher subject to approach without hurting someone else.” The fear of offending others or saying things that are perceived as racist and/or incorrect is one of many challenges that can motivate students to avoid participating in race talk.

For students of color especially, the desire to keep one’s self- integrity and positive racial identity intact, can also motivate students to avoid engaging in race talk. One of the key features of productive race talk is the critical examination of systemic racism and how race plays a role in the oppression of specific subgroups in society (Howard, 2004), however, reliving the racial trauma

experienced by one’s ancestors can be difficult and emotionally draining. Moreover, public and identity- salient interactions increase the risk involved. For example, Davon, a Black, male, 11th grade student, described his discomfort during race talk when things got “too personal.” In the following quote he specifically references not wanting to discuss the treatment of Blacks during the Civil Rights Era, “I didn’t want them to tell us [the students] what they [white people in the Civil Rights era] were saying.” He then goes on to acknowledge the negative emotions he and some of his peers experienced when forced to relive Black trauma despite possessing prior knowledge about the horrific treatment of Blacks during that period, “I mean, we already know, but some people feel some type of way when they tell us about it.”

As illustrated through these examples, the desire to protect one’s self and others from psychological harm presents a significant challenge to facilitating race talk in the classroom. It is also the case that discussions about race and racism are at odds with some of the foundational assumptions about knowledge and learning that are deeply ingrained into many schools in Western society, namely the principle of objectivity. Sue (2015, p. 65) describes this tension,

The conditions that would facilitate a meaningful dialogue on race, for example, may be at odds with learning assumptions, policies, and practices of the academic

environment (Hooks, 1994; Palmer, 2007). What has been called the academic protocol, for example, emphasizes a learning environment characterized by objectivity, rationality, and intellectual insight and inquiry (APA Presidential Task Force, 2012; Young, 2003). Race talk, however, is highly subjective, is intense, relies on storytelling, and is highly emotive in nature.

Given what we know about the features of effective race talk and the challenges and barriers for engaging students in such discussions, efforts towards equipping teachers with tools and skills necessary to facilitate meaningful learning opportunities through race talk is critical.

PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?



Establishing trust and mutual respect amongst members of the classroom is an important first step to laying the foundation for effective race talk. Students should feel psychologically safe-in the sense that one's identities, perspectives, and contributions are valuable- within the learning environment. Below are some ways teachers can help cultivate psychologically safe spaces for facilitating race talk:

1. If you are preparing a unit or specific lesson that includes discussions on race, don't let it be a surprise! Let students know what to expect.
2. Set ground rules for discussions - have students help create the rules to encourage ownership over the process.
3. Conduct temperature checks - vary methods to gauge how students are feeling.
4. Provide choice in ways to participate (e.g., verbal discussion and writing) - not all students will be comfortable sharing publicly. The goal is to get them there but it's ok to honor their preferences for sharing- especially in such a sensitive context.
5. Practice attunement - be in the moment with students, demonstrate genuine investment in understanding student perspectives, and response to their expressed needs.
6. Be authentic - position yourself as a fellow thinker, practice honesty and vulnerability
7. Engage in power sharing- give opportunities for a range of student voices to be heard and validate various ways of thinking and understanding.
8. Treat racial blunders and mistakes as learning opportunities

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