



MYTH BUSTERS

What is your role in addressing race and racism in your school environment?

BY REBECCA ATKINS AND ALICIA OGLESBY

As school counselors, we have a responsibility to cultivate healthy learning environments for our students. What happens when we aren't able to identify issues related to race objectively and compassionately? These days, with a growing number of media reports about race, it is more important than ever to keep our discussions about equity moving forward toward understanding and action. Let's explore common myths about race and racism.



IT IS HELPFUL TO USE A SCHOOLWIDE DATA ANALYSIS TO CREATE CLOSING-THE-GAP PLANS AIMED AT CLOSING RACIAL DISPARITIES.

Myth: Kids Don't See Color

Whenever discussions regarding teaching diversity come up, the argument that race is a social construct and that “kids don't see race” usually surfaces. In fact, research shows that babies as young as six months will look significantly longer at photos of faces that are of a different race than their parents. The book “Nurtureshock” includes an example of an experiment done in a preschool class. The children each received either a red or blue shirt. After distributing the shirts, the adults in the room didn't mention them. However, the kids were more likely to play with others wearing the same color shirt and to rate their shirt color as superior to the alternate. It is part of human nature to notice patterns and to make decisions and choices based on these patterns. By not discussing race, we add to the taboo and allow children to come to their own conclusions, which may not align with our values.

Instead, it is helpful to discuss race in a similar way that we discuss gender. When reading books, watching movies and exploring the world around us we can make sure we offer representation from a variety of races and explicitly teach that a person's worth or potential isn't related skin color.

In classroom discussions, it is essential that classmates are comfortable with one another and a sense of trust is established. If needed, you can begin the discussion with some icebreaker topics to establish a feel of open communication. Typically, students will become more open to the discussion and share their ideas. If students, or adults, feel uncomfortable it can be helpful to incorporate examples. Beginning phrases like: “some people might feel,” “I've heard some people say,” or “an example might be” are great ways

to get the conversation going and allows participants to speak in the hypothetical as a starting point before moving to more personal reflection.

Myth: It's Poverty, Not Race

The 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report shows that reading scores for eighth-grade black children from middle-class households are the same as those for poor white peers eligible for free and reduced-priced lunch. So why is it important to discuss the impact of race on the achievement gap? Can't we just try our best for each individual student and then see results? To close the achievement gap, schools must face the truth about what is really happening. School counselors are in the unique position to look at schoolwide data and ask questions and implement interventions or programs to effect systemic change.

It is helpful to use a schoolwide data analysis to create closing-the-gap plans aimed at closing racial disparities. For example, you might see that minority students are underrepresented in AP courses and use data to target students who could be successful in a higher-level course. One way to dig deeper into your school's data is to look at two identifying factors. For instance, look for students in a subgroup who aren't considered proficient and also have high absences to target for attendance interventions. In this way, you are implementing meaningful intervention without making an assumption that all within a subgroup need it.

When discussing the achievement gap, there is a large elephant in the room – teacher perception. It can be a delicate balance to discuss teacher perception without implying teachers in your building don't have students' best interests

at heart. However, we need to keep in mind that even those with students' best interests in mind sometimes don't get the needed results. Using data to guide discussions can help all participants feel more comfortable and encourage honest conversation without judgment.

Myth: Prejudice is the same as racism.

Prejudices are a part of the human experience. We prejudge a situation or person based on ideas and perceptions. Prejudice is often used to describe racism, so let's create clarity around this common misconception. Prejudice means a set of opinions that typically have no basis in evidence. My opinion that tall males wearing a green hoodie are dangerous is a prejudice because there is no evidence to suggest that hoodie-wearing males are dangerous (or more dangerous than short males who do not wear hoodies). Racism is a set of beliefs, prejudices, practices, behaviors or opinions with the ability to have a negative impact on entire communities of a different race. The underlying belief or opinion is that there are inherent differences between races.

So, you think you aren't racist and you monitor your prejudices by remaining self-aware and nonbiased? Chances are, you'd be incorrect in that assumption. Let's explore why. We've established that prejudices are opinions and possibly easier to identify than racism. If you are white, you have been exposed to ideas, images, education and culture since birth that have affirmed your importance and relevance. See any magazine, book, television show or advertisement for that evidence.

When white people work with children of color, their perspective is that of a person who has been valued in American society since its inception. You may assume students of color feel this value. Not necessarily. You may speak with students of color and their families and wonder why they don't engage with the education system. You may feel saddened that the students don't fully commit to their studies and activities. As a result, you may consider these students to be uninterested, so you guide them minimally to avoid the resistance. You may do the exact opposite and assume all students of color require specialized

intervention and work hard with the best intentions to provide intervention. Both of these strategies are problematic for various reasons and speak to the subtle, yet pervasive nature of racism: the set of beliefs and behaviors that place non-whites as individuals, groups and/or systems to be saved, changed, altered and affected. Instead, use data to dig deeper and determine where action can close the achievement gap.

Although you may have phenomenal relationships with your students, don't overlook the very real experience your students have with race. Read books, engage in dialogue, confront race topics with others, learn your family history, examine messages taught in your upbringing and challenge your ideas about race. Ask students "What is your experience being one of five black students at this school?" Practice making statements such as "I am white, and you are black. Do you think that will affect our relationship? If so, how?" You will probably have to

practice for it to feel less awkward and more authentic.

Myth: If children are successful, that means they aren't affected by racism.

As overt racism becomes increasingly less socially acceptable, we must continue to work to ensure the conversation about social justice and racial equality remains in the forefront of our purpose as educators. Racism is typically no longer a person dressed in a white hooded cloth burning a cross on a black man's front lawn. Racism is the ability to enroll 500 black and Latino students in middle school without a single student enrolled in advanced or honors classes. Racism is the ability to deprive predominantly black and Latino schools of necessary funding and safe, environmentally healthy facilities. Yet, as school counselors, we are charged with focusing our efforts on many concrete and tangible issues. Systemic problems can have debilitating outcomes just as often as more identifiable problems.

Despite all of these circumstances, some students will still thrive. Let's look a bit deeper and pull from our graduate training to better understand how this works. What we have learned about resiliency is that the human condition can adapt to tumultuous environments through the integration of nature and nurture. We can help raise children with various models of character education, behavior modification, reward systems and anti-bullying curriculums. Many students will benefit from such programs. Many won't. When we aren't including race relations as a part of our daily school counseling work, the effects of racism are inevitable. Some students will be compelled to work harder in school despite society's negative view of their family, neighborhood and upbringing. Some students will be crippled by racism and fail classes, become disengaged, be disruptive and resistant. Is racism the only reason for these occurrences? No, but the effects need to be



Empower your teaching or counseling career

WITH AN ONLINE GRADUATE DEGREE OR CERTIFICATE from Mizzou's award-winning College of Education.

Choose from MU's 100% online graduate options for results that empower your students, your school community and YOU:

- Mental Health Practices in Schools (M Ed, EdSp)
- Student Learning and Well-being (M Ed)
- Multicultural Education (graduate certificate)
- Positive Psychology (graduate certificate)

ONLINE.MISSOURI.EDU/ESCP-ASCA



CONTACT US
MizzouOnline@missouri.edu
1-800-609-3727



THE FIRST STEP IN ANY PLAN OF ACTION IS TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT ACTION IS NEEDED.

considered as often as we consider the level of parental engagement or the symptoms of mental illness.

Outliers exist in every group and subgroup. There are some black students who in most ways are unaffected by living in a racist society. Our practice as school counselors is not based on outliers. We are educated and trained to counsel any student who walks through our door. The vast majority of students of color whom we encounter will have some obvious and less obvious negative experiences with racism. It is our duty to never assume that because a student makes straight A's that the student is unaffected by the ills of our American culture. We have to be willing and able to keep race

as a discussion and understanding point. We have to be willing and able to move beyond conversations of race into action. On any given day, we may discover that our school culture is racist. What will be the plan of action to confront it?

The first step in any plan of action is to acknowledge that action is needed. You can work to first identify racial inequality and then second to continually bring inequality into the conversation during professional learning community meetings, when working on the school improvement plan and when writing closing-the-gap goals. When planning professional development opportunities at your school, you can contribute ideas that will expand the cultural competencies of all staff.

Consider this: After reading the litany of books dedicated to anti-racist school systems, exploring your history of race and collecting and analyzing data about your school, what then will you do? Will you create reports and share at the next professional development meeting? Will you arrange a school leadership meeting to advocate for new programming to confront racism? Will you shed a few tears because you feel powerless? Will you enlist the help of school counselors of color to guide different practices? Will you do all of the above? Will you do nothing? ☒

Rebecca Atkins is senior administrator for Wake County Public Schools, N.C. She can be reached at counselorup@gmail.com or through her blog at www.counselorup.com Alicia Oglesby is a high school counselor at Emerson Preparatory School, Washington, D.C. She can be reached at alicia.oglesby@emersonprep.net. Contact the authors for references to this article.



Who says you can't afford college?

At Keene State College, we provide a return on your investment – with affordable tuition, financial aid to help you pay it, and an education that will serve you for a lifetime.

Keene
STATE COLLEGE

Wisdom to make a difference.

229 Main Street | Keene, New Hampshire 03435 | keene.edu/afford

