THINKING DEEPLY ABOUT DIFFERENCE

The Professional Approach to Diversity in Schools

DIVERSITY WITHOUT SILOS

THE POWER OF CONVERSATION

EXAMINING PRIVILEGE

GREAT MINDS DO NOT THINK ALIKE
We know that using the overused “elephant in the room” metaphor these days is to risk losing the reader’s full attention. But when it comes to diversity work in independent schools — especially regarding race — the research, including ours, makes it clear that there is one very large and rather noisy elephant in most independent schools. It’s stepping on just about everyone’s toes and trumpeting loudly for attention. And if not acknowledged and addressed, it will keep schools from fulfilling not only their diversity missions but also their overall missions — especially regarding excellence as 21st-century schools.

If it helps, you can think of the elephant as, say, a triceratops or a mastodon or a dire wolf or the smoke monster on the TV show *Lost*. What matters here is that school leaders slow down long enough to take a good hard look at this imposing, yet routinely unacknowledged presence. When we stop avoiding it, when we stop pretending it’s not there, when we stop thinking that it’s not an issue that deeply affects schools, we can make huge strides in our diversity work.

*HOW LEADERSHIP ON RACIAL IMPROVES LITERACY IN SCHOOLS*
What is the elephant? In this context, it is the unacknowledged silence about the racial disparities in the school climate, a silence that makes it hard for teachers of color to raise, discuss, or face conflicts related to race. The silence is generated by the dominant culture, undermines the experiences of teachers of color, and perpetuates policies and programs that make true advancement in diversity work difficult, if not impossible.

Talking about race can be stressful. No one wants to say the wrong thing or be seen as one who always raises the issue, who always challenges the dominant narrative.

Our individual and collaborative research tells us that the experiences of teachers of color in independent school are mixed. Through the years, we have worked with hundreds of young and veteran educators of color. Many have found great success and joy in their work, but they also face challenges regarding race, class, privilege, and power and often find themselves on the receiving end of harmful microaggressions — those subtle but painful race-based slights. Typically, these slights rise out of erroneous but widely shared views of people based on race — and are designed, mostly subconsciously, to underscore dominant and subordinate cultures.

The question that rises to surface in all such situations is in regard to how a school community responds to such knowledge. Currently, there is a tendency in schools to deny the existence of the issues of race and privilege raised by faculty of color, or, if acknowledged, there is little room to discuss them and fix the culture accordingly. It's also clear that much of the power for making the cultural change needed to face this elephant starts at the top. In other words, governance and school leaders set the tone for how and how often a school community engages in conversation about equity and inclusion. There's great value in hiring a diversity/multicultural/equity and inclusion director or community life director, but the existence of this position does not absolve the head from taking leadership in this work.

Part of paying attention to issues that undermine the experiences of teachers of color means that heads also examine their school's hiring practices — an area in which a high degree of silence about racial issues predominates. We know of too many gifted and talented educators of color who, in their job search, become discouraged at consistently finding themselves finalists, but are never offered the position. They describe the weariness of getting to the finalist stage but no further as "search fatigue." It is especially painful when the position goes to someone whose credentials are similar or, from the candidate of color's view, not as strong. This experience most certainly is not exclusive to independent schools, and many schools are paying more attention to this problem and doing more than just aiming to have a finalist of color in every pool. But the number of interview-weary teachers of color remains too high.

Focus on Climate
It has taken some time to really grasp the essence of diversity, equity, and inclusion work and, thus, understand what undermines the success that schools strive to reach through this work — and to address issues that are consistently voiced by diversity practitioners. In the collective research, a key theme is how privilege, power, and fear of talking about race have prevented schools from creating an inclusive and diverse school community. Collective organizational vision draws its power from the narratives of the majority group. A school that resists or dismisses opportunities to understand or question that narrative is less likely to have practices or policies that address diversity issues. In such an organization, in fact, those who would raise concerns often receive negative feedback and are likely to be silenced.

Talking about race can be stressful. No one wants to say the wrong thing or be seen as one who always raises the issue, who always challenges the dominant narrative. However, school communities that dismiss racial concerns or push them under the rug undermine progress in diversity efforts, damage the school culture and climate, and take away from the
essential work of preparing all students to live fully in the world. The most socially responsible thing we can do is to prepare our students to be culturally literate in an increasingly global community and to equip them to interact with a broad range of people. But we can’t complete this work well without a well-functioning diverse adult community in our schools. And we can’t have a diverse adult community in a school without addressing issues of inclusion and equity. Cultural or racial literacy won’t appear simply because we use the word “diversity” daily. Learning how to negotiate racial conflicts won’t become less stressful because we remind our schools about the ideas of social justice in our mission statements. Learning how to accurately read and interpret racially stressful social interactions in our school politics and relationships, modify our fear and avoidance of those interactions and conversations, and engage this elephant assertively and competently toward a satisfactory resolution takes courageous leadership — and that takes practice.

The good news is that the leadership work is being done in some schools. In our research, one participant drove home the point: “Our head has the attitude that we have a lot of work to do around issues of diversity, and encourages us to work at this. She also says very openly that making mistakes in this area is inevitable and that we’re not perfect, but that we should be working towards bettering our environment in this regard nonetheless.”

We encourage all school leaders to aim for a school climate in which all members are both able to truly be themselves and to engage in productive and supportive conversations around equity and inclusion.

**Fostering a Sense of Belonging**

For schools, the professional approach to diversity is to collectively dissect the data, the experience, and the number of people of color in senior leadership positions, compared with whites, and begin to have an honest conversation about the obstacles or implicit bias that can affect the outcome we seek. In addition, we must look at the history of our schools, especially the power and privilege dynamics that go into making crucial hiring decisions. As many researchers have noted, we tend to be attracted to people who are most like us. When making hiring decisions, we must ensure that decision makers, search committees, search firms, agents, school leaders, and members of the governing bodies carefully define and consider what “fit” means for faculty or administrators. Outside consultants, who are experienced with such dynamics, are often necessary to help school leaders become aware of these potential pitfalls. They are able to help schools create more effective hiring and retention policies and practices. When power is authentically and equally distributed, a diverse team, in thinking and background, can yield the most innovative outcomes and creative educational approaches. Research tells us that diverse teams make for a stronger decision-making process than homogeneous teams and will more likely result in a more effective and productive workplace.

In our research, we found that the teachers’ sense of belonging is very much related to how they feel about their intellectual, emotional, and racial interactions with colleagues. Also, it matters how much faculty members believe that school leadership understands the impact of these experiences. When teachers perceive school leaders to be courageous enough to initiate in-depth discussions on race, equity, and inclusion, they have a strong sense of belonging and perceive the school climate to be safe. The value of these discussions is not that one always expects an answer. It’s that such conversations reflect a safe atmosphere for intellectual inquiry and an openness to change. As other researchers make clear, racial battle fatigue is a common challenge for persons of color in schools — students, faculty, and parents. Having one’s concerns heard — being taken seriously when one raises issues about microaggressions or racial bias, or when one takes initiative to help fulfill a school’s diversity mission — is a major influence in one’s sense of belonging.

In our research, the more faculty members believed that leadership engages in proactive diversity initiatives and readily responds to racial conflict and stress, the stronger their sense of positive school membership. By contrast, the more they saw evidence of school leadership unwilling or unable to deal with issues of race, the less confident they were in the school and in their ability to engage or manage racial conflict. Leaders who practice avoidance in coping with the stress brought on by the racial elephant in the room risk undermining safety for all faculty within school climates and risk increasing racial battle fatigue.

We have also come to better understand, and have great respect for, the profound strength of faculty of color and their dedication to their work in schools. Even when some made the decision to leave their schools because of difficulties they encountered, or when they chose not to speak up out of fear of consequences, they demonstrated a clear commitment to their students. They understand that they are role models for all the students in their care and make daily contributions to the well-being of the school community.

But schools cannot rely alone on the resiliency of educators of color. In time, swallowing and suppressing one’s voice on racial matters has negative effects on one’s emotional well-being and professional identity. School leaders, therefore, must examine the risk factors these teachers of color face, as well as the protective factors that influence the experiences and perceptions of all faculty in independent schools. Our research confirms the link between schools authentically engaging in diversity, equity, and inclusion and the overall well-being and sense of belonging of its members.

For schools that truly desire healthy climates in regard to race and other social identifiers, leaders need to exhibit more than goodwill. They must acknowledge the elephant, acknowledge the need for much-improved racial literacy — and act on that need.
Racial Literacy

As noted, school climate, as determined by policies and practices, can be influenced by how and how often leadership engages in conversations about race and privilege. But what matters most in the development of racial literacy is how well leaders — through guided self-reflection on, mindful reduction of, and practiced engagement with the stress of racialized and privileged social interactions — guide their communities in this work. On the individual level, racial literacy is the belief in and the ability to read, recast, and resolve racially stressful encounters. How members of the school community react, deny, or respond to issues of race and privilege raised by faculty of color will determine the experiences of those teachers of color and the degree to which a school can grow in its diversity knowledge and leadership.

What does racial literacy look like in an independent school community? It would include school leadership learning how to use racial stress reduction and mindfulness practices before they develop diversity mission statements or engage in diversity conversations or conflicts. It would include creating climates of safety through ongoing professional development sessions that encourage storytelling, journaling, stress reduction, debating, and role-playing of racial elephant situations. Finally, it would include annual evaluation and processing of past and current racial elephant situations using case studies to illuminate and discuss the clash of different vantage points and coping demands of students, teachers, parents, and leaders. In particular, leadership in racial literacy means being able to:

1. face racial conflicts as challenges rather than as threats;
2. resolve your own stress during the moment of a racial crisis;
3. evaluate your stress vulnerability and management after each crisis;
4. use relaxation strategies to resolve stress reactions that ignite avoidance of racial encounters;
5. seek help from experts to resolve any racial conflict;
6. keep a log of case studies of racial conflicts that allow you to learn from mistakes and triumphs; and
7. develop mission statements that support the aim of a well-functioning diverse faculty.

Acknowledging racism and privilege, while a good first step, is not enough. It will only allow schools to treat the symptom of racism and privilege, but not address the root cause. Organizations serious about authentic change will need to draw upon the narratives of individuals from multiple groups in order to better understand their racial realities and embrace the differential stressfulness of those realities. Helping all members of the school community develop intercultural competencies through practice can move the organization further than just relying on a fixed diversity plan. As we put it in our research, “The explicit measurement of one’s stress and coping with racialized experiences is an initial step in illuminating that obfuscation.”

Acknowledging the elephant in the room is an opportunity to begin an authentic effort to develop teacher and school leadership training in racial literacy. By doing so, educators will have the opportunity to recast “avoidant reactors” and move toward “assertive coping reactions” that lead to open conversations, increased racial understanding, better individual experiences, and an all-around healthier community.

While our research has focused on race, the findings can also be used as a tool for addressing issues related to gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, and any other social identifiers. The overall goal should be to increase the voice and a sense of belonging for all members of the faculty. But we believe — and the research makes clear — that we can’t do this well if we’re not willing to openly discuss the way that the socialization of racial avoidance affects the experiences of people of color in our schools.

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