



# Reasons for Hope:

## You Can Challenge Educational Inequities

*Inequity in education has many causes and correlates, but one important element is often left out. Racism is hard to discuss and its devastating effects hard to understand, but there are ways to begin the conversation and start the healing.*

By JULIAN WEISSGLASS

I usually start my workshops on educational equity by asking educators how they would explain the achievement gap between different racial and socio-economic groups if they were invited to make a statement to their school board. Their explanations span an array of categories: family conditions, peer culture, poverty, curriculum, pedagogy, cultural differences, teachers' expectations, unequal access to resources, lack of role models, and language differences. Although their list illustrates the complexity of the situation and its emotional nature, very few of the thousands of educators to whom I have asked this question have specifically mentioned racism or classism.

Their reluctance to include race does not surprise me. Race and class are two of the most controversial issues facing U.S. society and are usually neglected in educational forums. A Latina teacher (in a district with 85% students of color) wrote at the end of an institute I led, "I've never had the opportunity to talk about this issue [racism] with

other people of different cultural groups than mine.... It has been very encouraging to see that it is possible to address these issues in a sensitive and respectful manner."

### A Proposal

Because these topics deserve and require considerably more attention than they traditionally command, I propose that educators establish programs to:

- Increase people's understanding of how race and class bias—personal and institutionalized, conscious and unconscious, blatant and subtle—operate in schools and society to impede student learning
- Identify practices and policies that interfere with the learning of students of color and of students from low-income households and replace them with effective ones.

Reasons for hope that inequity, racism, and the achievement gap will be eliminated exist, and there are some practical steps for carrying out such a program. They are not simple actions, however, and they demand commitment and



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dedication to be successful. Before any actions are taken, I suggest two guidelines to help principals begin the task of examining these issues in their schools:

**A.** Resist trying to solve specific school problems until you have created shared meaning and increased trust. Even if you believe that you have a collegial atmosphere, unless you have given members of the school community the opportunity to talk with one another about how they have been affected by different forms of prejudice, "problem-solving discussions" often become unproductive, confrontational, or confused by posturing and pretense.

**B.** Avoid conducting major projects, such as schoolwide "celebrating diversity" events, until the steps are taken to establish trust. Although such events may cause people to feel good temporarily and appear to be successful, they may be counter-productive in the long run if no substantial progress is made toward building trust among members of different ethnic or class groups and increasing understanding of how racism or classism affects teaching and learning.

### DEFINITIONS

**Start by discussing definitions to create shared meanings of the terms that people use or at least a shared understanding of what they disagree about.** It is important, for example, that we know what other people mean when they use the terms *racism* or *sexism* or *classism*. Because of space constraints, I will focus on racism in this article, but the implications for addressing these other issues should be clear. I use the following definition of racism:

Racism is the systematic mistreatment of certain groups of people (often referred to as people of color) on the basis of skin color or other (real or supposed) physical characteristics. This mistreatment is carried out by societal institutions or by White people who have been conditioned by the society to act, consciously or unconsciously, in harmful ways toward people of color, with the mistreatment condoned or colluded in by the society as a whole. [Author's note: The terms used to describe different racial groups are themselves controversial. This is inevitable since humans form one race, and racial terms are social, not biological, classifications. Any label is inadequate and a gross simplification. Because skin color is the basis of racism, I will use "people of color" as a term for darker skinned people residing in the United States whose origins are outside Europe. I will use White or European Americans for U.S. residents whose ancestors came from Europe. I know there is no such thing as a white-skinned person, that some European

Americans are darker-skinned than some people from outside Europe, and that there are many people of mixed heritage.]

Racism is different than prejudice. Although a person of color can be prejudiced toward and hurt a White person, people of color face systematic and ongoing personal and institutionalized biases every day in this country. Shirley Chisholm, the first Black U.S. congresswoman wrote: "Racism is so universal in this country, so widespread and deep-seated, that it is invisible because it is so normal" (1970). Because schools are the primary formal societal institution that young people encounter, they have enormous responsibility in combating racism. What schools do—or don't do—significantly affects the future of their students and of our society.

Racism can be subtle or blatant, conscious or unconscious, personal or institutionalized. Unconscious personal bias occurs, for example, when teachers have low expectations of Black or Latino students when they interact with them less thoughtfully and less often than they do with White students. Institutionalized racism includes:

- The incorporation into institutional policies or practices of attitudes and values that work to the disadvantage of students of color (for example, tracking practices that consign many students of color to low tracks with less-experienced teachers from which they can seldom escape)
- The unquestioned acceptance by the institution of White middle-class values (for example, rewarding facility in taking tests or the absence of authors of color in many secondary school English curricula)



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Figure 1

### Perspectives On Equity

1. No one is born prejudiced. All forms of bias, from extreme bigotry to unaware cultural biases, are acquired—actually imposed on the young person.
2. We are one species. All humans are very much alike biologically.
3. In many societies, many of the assumptions, values, and practices of people and institutions from the dominant culture serve to the disadvantage of students from the nondominant culture.
4. Individual prejudice and institutionalized biases are dysfunctional for individuals and to the society as a whole.
5. Systematic mistreatment (such as racism, classism, or sexism) is more than the sum of individual prejudices. Thoughtful action with regard to curriculum, pedagogy, and school policies and organization is necessary to overcome the effects on people and institutions of a long history of prejudice and discrimination.
6. Individuals and groups internalize and transfer the systematic mistreatment. They often act harmfully toward themselves and each other. This process must be identified and eliminated.
7. Educators are an important force in helping many people overcome the effects of societal bias and discrimination, but schools also serve to perpetuate the inequalities and prejudices in society.
8. Race, class, and gender bias are serious issues facing U.S. society and education that are usually not discussed. Talking about them is necessary, not to lay blame, but to figure out better ways of educating our children.
9. Lack of acceptance and support is an impediment to the development of educational leadership among people of color, women, and the working class.
10. To make progress on this very complex problem, it will be necessary to improve alliances between educators from different ethnic and racial groups, between males and females, and between people of different class backgrounds.
11. Discussing and gaining new understandings about the existence and effects of bias and discrimination will usually be accompanied by strong emotions.
12. Changed attitudes and actions will be facilitated if we are listened to attentively and allowed to release our emotions as we attempt to make sense of our experiences and the experiences of others.

- Schools' passiveness in the face of prejudiced behavior that interferes with student learning or well-being (for example, not addressing harassment or teasing or meeting it with punishment instead of attempting to build communication and understanding).



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#### ASSUMPTIONS

**Provide opportunities for people (including yourself) to reflect on and talk about their assumptions about different dimensions of equity.** The National Coalition for Equity in Education has developed 12 assumptions, called *Perspectives on Equity*, to guide our work [see figure 1]. People at our workshops talk about whether they agree with these assumptions, what they would add, and what the implications are for their work if the assumptions are true. We do not seek agreement on the perspectives, although I emphasize the importance of accepting, at least as a working hypothesis, that no one is born prejudiced. It is important that people think and talk about their assumptions related to the issues raised in the *Perspectives on Equity*. Educators can also read and discuss personal stories that have been transcribed to illustrate the various perspectives. For example, the story in figure 2 is used to encourage discussion of Perspective 4.

#### THE HISTORY AND NATURE OF RACISM

**Provide opportunities for students and adults to learn about the history and nature of the oppression that people of color have endured.** Schools rarely teach in depth about the genocide of indigenous peoples, the kidnapping and slavery of Africans, the seizure of the Southwest U.S. territory from Mexico, the mistreatment of Chinese immigrants and citizens, the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and the practices of segregation and discrimination. Students are often told falsehoods. For example, the authors of *The Connected Mathematics Project*, a popular eighth-grade mathematics text, in an attempt to situate an algebra lesson in a historical situation, wrote, "When Mexico ceded California to the United States in 1848, California was a relatively unexplored territory with only a few thousand people." In fact, anthropologists estimate that there were approximately 150,000 indigenous people in California at that time. Furthermore, to say that "Mexico ceded California to the United States" without mentioning that the U.S. military was threatening to conquer the whole country is akin to saying that in the 17th century, large numbers of Africans came to North America to help grow cotton without mentioning slavery.

A lack of knowledge is a large part of the problem. Most educators do not know very much about the eugenics movement and how its theories of White superiority influenced

education. For example, Carl Brigham, who as secretary of the College Entrance Examination Board developed the Scholastic Aptitude Test (now called the SAT), wrote in *A Study of American Intelligence*, "The decline of American intelligence will be more rapid than the decline of the intelligence of European national groups owing to the presence here of the Negro" (1923). Educational Testing Services, the organization that produces and sells the SAT, has a library named after Brigham. (See Tucker, 1994, and Gould, 1981 for more discussion of the eugenics movement.)

And Brigham was not an isolated fanatic. The eugenics movement included prominent citizens; psychologists, such as Lewis Terman, one of the primary developers of the Stanford Binet IQ test; and educators and geneticists from leading American universities. For example, Edward East (1929), a Harvard geneticist, wrote, "Gene packets of African origin are not valuable supplements to the gene packets of European origin; it is the white germ plasm that counts" (p. 199). The standardized tests that we currently use were originally developed on the basis of the theories and assumptions of men who believed in the superiority of certain racial, national, and social groups and attempted to influence governmental and educational policies. Although the eugenics movement in this country fell into disrepute after the Nazis took the belief of racial superiority to a horrific conclusion in the 1940s, many people's expectations and attitudes toward people of color are still influenced by these discredited theories. The ideas persist, often in subtler and more sophisticated forms. For example, as late as 1994, Murray & Herrnstein stated in *The Bell Curve*, "Putting it

Figure 2

### I JUST GAVE IN

I grew up in a city and lived in a very Italian American community, which also had a pretty high minority percentage of African Americans.... My school was primarily children of Italian American and African American background. When I was about seven, I made friends with a girl in my class, who was African American. I brought her home one day. We were there playing for awhile, and I gave her something to drink. After she left, my mother threw the glass away. (crying) She couldn't explain to me (pause, crying).... Other things I will forgive her for, but that I won't. She said I couldn't play with her anymore. And I guess I just gave in. I was young and didn't know what to do. She tried to say that these people lived in these projects and they had diseases. She went on and on about this kind of stuff.... It just didn't make sense to me. She was a nice child, she didn't seem any different from me. I was poor too....

It's to the point now that there are things I won't talk to my family about. We don't talk about any deep issues because we can't talk about them without getting into arguments. If I see my family once a year, that's probably the most I will see them. I live across the country from them and that's not an accident.

*Excerpt from a White female college professor talking on a Personal Experience Panel.*

all together, success and failure in the American economy and all that goes with it, are increasingly a matter of the genes that people inherit" (p. 91).

Let me be clear that the eugenics movement was based on untruths. Human beings are one species. We are much more alike than we are different. Each human being is valuable beyond measure. Each deserves to be treated with complete respect—regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical abilities, or physical appearance.

Therefore, it is not surprising that European Americans do not always understand the feelings of Native Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, or Asian Americans because they do not understand how the long history of racism has affected people of color.

#### SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITIES

**Work toward having people view your school as a community that embraces the idea of the opportunity to understand racism and other forms of systematic mistreatment and to heal from the hurts they cause.** Good intentions, commitment, and even hard work are not sufficient for eliminating racism in schools. Neither will excellent curricula and pedagogy be enough to eradicate the achievement gap. We need communities where White people can listen to people of color talk about how they and their ancestors have experienced racism and where people of color can listen to White people talk about how they have seen racial prejudice in operation and how it affected them. Listening to each other's stories and emotions helps people identify what needs to change within their institutions and within themselves. Being listened to

helps us heal. Professional therapists are not necessary for this, nor are there enough of them to do the job. It is our responsibility—and our opportunity—as educators to do this work. In my professional development workshops, I use dyads, support groups, and personal experience panels (Weissglass, 1997) to build community and promote healing. In these structures, people divide time equally and receive attention for their thoughts and feelings. Listeners do not give advice or interpretation and emotional release is accepted. Confidentiality is maintained. People do not complain about the listeners or mutual acquaintances (Weissglass, 1990; 2000).

A school community in which people have the necessary support to heal from how they've been hurt is quite different than a typical school and deserves an explanation. Human beings experience considerable hurt (physical and emotional) when they are young—from accidents and from mistreatment or neglect by other young people, adults, or institutions. Although as adults we may have forgotten many of those experiences, they still affect us. People who are

“feeling bad” as a result of earlier experiences sometimes act in ways that are harmful to others. They may make misguided attempts to feel better by bonding with a group (informal or organized) that discriminates against (or even actively harasses) other people. They may exclude or marginalize others or act in patronizing or condescending ways. It is obvious to most people that it is hurtful to be the target of racism (or any form of bias); it is less obvious that any biased stance (thoughts, beliefs, actions) limit an individual’s learning, relationships, and emotional health.

When young people see or hear about injustice in the world, they often feel fear, confusion, or grief even when they are not the targets. If they question injustice, they are often ignored, ridiculed, or humiliated by adults who say such things as “I don’t have time to talk about that now,” “This is just a phase you’re going through,” or “You are so naive.” These hurtful experiences perpetuate racism. We can heal from these experiences, but it requires the release of the ensuing painful emotions through the natural physiological processes of talking, laughing, trembling, perspiring, “tantrumming,” yawning, and crying. (I learned about emotional release from reevaluation counseling. See Jackins, [1965] for an introduction to the theory of reevaluation counseling.)

Unfortunately, our society does not allow people to heal sufficiently in this way. Boys are told, “Big boys don’t cry.” Children are sent to their room or given sweets or other inducements to stop them from crying. Expressing frustration or anger is stifled. Showing fear is often greeted with derision or taunts—“Don’t be a sissy.” The net result is that most adults do not have full access to the natural physiological processes of emotional release with which they were born.

Building and sustaining communities committed to healing from the hurts of racism, however, will be challenging.

Figure 3

**BEING DARK WAS A PROBLEM**

I was taught very early that being dark was a problem in my family because we had very light people. And we talked about skin color—that that [light color] was an advantage. And I was told by my grandparents that if my mom hadn’t married my black dad, I would have been light like my beautiful cousins. And probably would have been able to have good hair like them. And so, that preference and that superiority that I saw among my lighter complexion relatives was one. And then class was part of that because so many [of our family] were middle class. And I got direct instruction that “if you want to make it in the white world, you’re going to have to be twice as good. But, it’s too bad you’re dark. But, you can overcome that if you’re smart. And say your words right”—and all of that.... I now know that I was giving away a whole lot of myself to fit in and that I was disconnecting from how I felt and who I was.

*Excerpt from an African American educator (former principal) talking on a Personal Experience Panel.*

The culture of schools does not respect emotional release. (See Weissglass, 1990, for a discussion of possible reasons.)

It is easier for educators to have a one-day workshop celebrating diversity, to develop new curriculum, or to write mission statements than to talk about personal experiences with racism. Politicians prefer to talk in the abstract about the achievement gap, to blame teachers, or pressure students rather than to enable schools to deal with racism in meaningful and productive ways.

**Internal and Transferred Racism**

**Understand internalized racism and transferred racism and intervene and undo the hurts from these phenomena.** I use the terms *internalized racism* and *transferred racism* to refer to the processes of people believing and acting on the negative messages they receive about themselves (internalized) and their group (transferred). Internalized racism causes some people of color to believe that they are not as intelligent or as worthwhile as White people. And it seems to impede their academic functioning. (Figures 3 and 4 are used to help people understand internalized and transferred racism.) Research on test taking shows that the performance of members of nearly any stereotyped group can be negatively affected by manipulating the conditions of the environment to bring to consciousness or subconsciousness one’s membership in that group (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Internalized and transferred racism occur when people are hurt and not allowed to heal through emotional release. As a result, they are pulled to reenact the hurt on someone else. Because people of color have rarely been able to act out their hurt on White people, they tend to act it out on family members and other people of color. The hurts tend to get passed on from generation to generation. Giving encouragement, setting high expectations, interrupting put-downs, helping students build caring relationships, and instilling self-confidence help students contradict the effects of internalized and transferred oppression. Teachers and schools who have closed the achievement gap for Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans have undoubtedly made progress in helping students overcome or heal from the effects of internalized racism.

**Leadership Is Necessary**

There is substantial resistance to addressing racism. White people may not recognize racism, and if they do, they may avoid confronting their own or other peoples’ prejudices—or even talking honestly about them. They may deny that racism affects them or institutional policies. They may be fearful of discussing racial issues with people of color. People of color may feel hopeless or cynical about the possibility of change. They may be skeptical of White people making a commitment to combat racism. If they have been academically or financially successful, they may contend that racism is no longer a factor

Figure 4

**I ALWAYS FELT INADEQUATE**

It happened slowly and you know what’s going on but you can’t understand it...like the SRA, the reading classes...there’s different colors [for different levels]. I was always in the lower one. I was treated a little bit different again because I was in this lower group and I started noticing a lot of my buddies were in the same group I was in and a lot of the other kids that were usually quiet were in the higher groups and you start kind of feeling a little bit less. You start feeling less about yourself...as I went into high school, they have the tracks A, B, and C. And C is just one step above special ed. And again, I was in the C group and my buddies were in the C group with me. You know...people treat you differently. As I got into college I always felt inadequate, not being capable to do these things.

*Excerpt from a Latino principal talking on a Personal Experience Panel.*

in current society. Leaders for educational equity will need to understand the personal, social, and institutional roots of inequities and have healed themselves from some of the hurts that a racist society imposed on them. They will need to understand how racism works in schools, be able to raise controversial issues while building unity, relate well with people from diverse backgrounds, and help people deal constructively with their own and others’ emotions about inequities. They will be able to help people recover from feelings of passivity, hopelessness, and powerlessness. Leaders will require exceptional commitment, understanding, persistence, and sensitivity.

**Reasons for Hope**

Any reform effort attempting to solve the inequities in education that does not help people heal from the hurts of growing up in a racist and classist society is not likely to succeed over time. But if schools develop communities where people can speak honestly and productively about racism and heal from their hurts, educators will be able to identify how their biases affect their students. They will challenge any attitudes of low expectations, communicate caring to students, and work with parents to help them support their children’s learning. They will identify how racism and classism become institutionalized in policies and practices. They will question their curricula and pedagogy and work to make it more engaging to students from different cultures and socioeconomic classes. Educators and parents will regard the character, understanding, and values that a young person develops as more important than his or her test scores. Schools will teach the history of oppressed peoples and how they have been treated and support students of color and their families to challenge internalized and transferred racism. They will move beyond the celebration of diversity and create communities in which it is possible

for students to heal from how they experience unfairness and discrimination. As students recover from their hurts they will be more likely to achieve their full academic potential. Establishing a caring community of learners will increase true learning and reduce student alienation and violence.

The above ideas may seem to you to be an idealistic, even naive, view of what is possible. Growing up in a dysfunctional society causes many people to have limited views of what schools can be. People are good, however, born without prejudice, and very intelligent. There is good reason to be hopeful that we can enable people to heal from how they have been hurt and create equitable schools—and a better society. PL

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