Race, Belief Systems and Student Achievement

In the August 8, 2001 issue of Education Week, Julian Weissglass’s commentary, “Racism and the Achievement Gap,” makes compelling arguments for communities in this country to face head on that racism and class bias contribute to persistent “disparities” in achievement between poor or racial/ethnic minority children and those who do not share those characteristics.

Focusing on racism, Mr. Weissglass argues that it is learned and that it is reinforced by “institutionalized racism,” “lack of information and misinformation,” “tenacity of belief” systems, internalization of the “acquiescence of racism” and “lack of opportunities to heal from hurt.” He then zeroes on the last point to propose that to eradicate the achievement gap, the nation must move beyond celebration of diversity and declarations that “all” children will learn in order to create what he calls “healing communities” in which individuals have an honest dialogue about racism. Through this process of caring and commitment to change, the country is to begin to heal. And with emotional healing, racism will wither away and, freed from its burden, students will achieve more and more equitably.

We agree with Mr. Weissglass’s concise diagnosis, but he does not go deep enough into the structures and policies that allow racism to be active in the lives of children and the business of our schools. We have to change the facts, not just the talk, that has been perpetuated by deep and historic social engineering that divides races and economic classes in America. It will take honest dialogue and leadership, but also much more than that to put our society and our students on equitable footing.

Surely racial equality has come a long way since the turn of the nineteenth century. For example, according to some surveys, 85% of Whites seem willing to vote for an African-American for president. Yet the fact remains that social policies, circumstances and economies continue to shape stereotypes about minorities, Hispanic and African-American in particular. Research by David Williams of the University of Michigan suggests that: all minorities are viewed negatively by Whites in terms of potential for violence; 45% of Whites think Blacks are lazy; 29% think Blacks are unintelligent; less than one in five think Blacks are hard working; and 56% of Whites feel that Blacks would rather live on welfare than work.

What has borne these beliefs that are sufficiently widespread and enduring to be stereotypical? Why do these misinterpretations persist about people of color, particularly the poor? As we alluded above, policies have shaped the economy and social conditions that persist in stereotypical thinking by Whites about minorities, and have significantly affected the ability of people of color to succeed. Some argue along with Weissglass, that this atmosphere has been internalized by people of color other than Asians, lack self-confidence and drive to succeed. Yet we hold that pride and drive are present in all, but are too often thwarted by external pressures that, over time, can, admittedly, corrode internal strengths. For example, policies and planning that fostered suburban development led to decreases in the quality of education for urban (read increasingly poor and minority) students. This in turn led to decreases in the preparation of poor minorities for higher education, denied them access to jobs, perpetuated male joblessness, undercut functioning families to create single parent households and led to concentrated poverty and violation. Out from the core city led to the isolation of many good jobs in suburbs accessible only by car — unlike the 1900s when jobs in the cities, jobs in the last half of the century moved to areas of lower minority concentration — intensifying the difficulties for these minorities to break out of the cycle of poverty.

Another example of social engineering that led to negative social outcomes for poor people of color is the perception about intelligence. To this day, many believe that the intelligence of Black and poor people of color is lower than that of White people. This point of view has been repeatedly recognized, as capital and race. In this widely-read book, two researchers argued that funds spent on poor children of color is a waste of money because it results in hurting “those people the money is intended to serve by steering them away from the lower-level aspirations and occupations that suit their abilities. Sadly, the authors, like several who have argued to the same general effect before them, dismissed the plethora of research which suggests that intelligence is a malleable and is susceptible to good teaching and learning. As important, the authors of publications such as The Bell Curve seem to ignore the thousands of successful African, Hispanic Americans and other minorities who have become successful doctors, lawyers, businessmen, producers, scientists, professors and teachers (to name a few). If they are perceived as the exception in minority communities, it is a result not of nature, but of seeing what one believes and of deep and enduring social engineering that has limited opportunity.

Despite so much investment (as Weissglass aptly notes) and real progress, for many people of color, the American dream remains a dream deferred. What can people in this country do to eradicate the achievement gap — the educational divide that continues to deny opportunity for so many? Research suggests the following:

1. Create good preschool experiences for all students. Research indicates that for students to do well, they need between 3,000-4,000 hours of good preschool experience — not the custodial care often provided by some preschool programs in urban areas.

2. Mandate all day kindergarten programs that build appropriate learning opportunities and social skills for all children, including poor children.

3. Increase community involvement in, and support for, the nation’s urban schools through creative public engagement activities that provide clear, accurate and timely information about performance and practical ways of shrinking achievement gaps while raising the levels for all. As part of this there should be movie, radio and television spots that feature the voices of children that model tolerance, celebrate diversity and the successes of urban education. When the community begins to understand that diversity based learning the develops the values, problem-solving and decision-making skills so important to success in academics and the workplace, parents might begin to embrace diversified learning communities.

4. Eliminate the tracking system — a common practice in which educators sort (particularly elementary) children by first impressions and assumed ability and then channel them into corresponding program levels. African and Hispanic American children are more likely than Whites to wind up on low tracks and in special education programs, and more likely to stay there through high school, yet even at high school levels, these students are capable of achieving more than was expected. They were not encouraged to see themselves as capable of success and given the tools to succeed. In this way, educators perpetuate the belief that the achievement gap can be eradicated. We join in support of all those in the nation who work on behalf of this goal.

The Challenge the American community faces again at the beginning of this school year is based on the promise of America — that all its children, no matter what color they are, are capable of high levels of achievement, and must be treated as future members and leaders of our national community — as a community resource that will contribute to improved conditions for all. We must stop backing the research and leads provided by many who have argued passionately for changes on Education Trust pages — changes in how we view potential, changes in the short-sighted position that resources should only be used to further the education and opportunities for my children -- not other people’s children.

Although complex, the answer to this challenge resides in how we provide leadership and apply resources to support those who have been shortchanged.

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