Did You Know | Why It Matters | For Equity Now

Confronting Internalized Racism

[Graphic Image Description: Translucent ghostly hands, coming out of the back of a racially ambiguous person of Color. The person is slumped forward, and appears sad. Concept of psychological self-flagellation, self-punishment, self-abasement, self-harm guilt feeling.]

"...all [BIPOC] can benefit from the process of decolonizing the mind whereby they recognize, reject, and heal from the psychological damage of white supremacy, patriarchy, racial colonization, racial violence, racial exploitation, and racial oppression."

- (Jackson et al., 2021, p. 298)

[Image description: The word "racism" written on a chalkboard, partially erased.]

What is Racism?

Racism is not a static phenomenon, confined to any one person, place, or thing. Racism is dynamic. It shifts and travels across time and space, and through culture and social interactions. To most 19th century people, what it meant to be Black, White, Asian, or Indigenous was biologically defined by scientists of the time, who asserted the various human races were distinct species and used pseudoscientific practices like phrenology to argue that white people were superior (Menand, 2001). The same faulty-scientific arguments were made by some white people to justify the enslavement of people of African descent.

Over the subsequent two centuries, racism evolved, particularly in the United States (U.S.). In the 20th century, while biological racism ideologies continued to promote the belief that Black, Indigenous, and people of Color (BIPOC) were naturally inferior, white supremacist ideologists' priorities expanded toward maintaining power through glaringly discriminatory practices (e.g., Jim Crow laws and Japanese internment camps; Alexander, 2020; Bobo, 2011). Today, racism often manifests in much more subtle ways (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). The *denial* of racism is a prime example of such a subtlety, as this denial attempts to mask the horrors and legacy of white supremacist ideology, albeit without explicitly vilifying BIPOC, such as Black, African American, Asian and Asian American, Latino/a/x, and Indigenous peoples.

Given racism's pliable and transmissible nature, it may come as no surprise that no one person or institution is immune from employing racism in harmful ways. This is true even for those most vulnerable to racism: BIPOC, especially those who experience multiple intersecting oppressions (e.g., racism, ableism, and sexism). Racism can function as an ideational tool[1] that can be appropriated in various contexts in ways that reinforce the system and ideology of white supremacy (Banks & Stephens, 2018; Nasir & Hand, 2006). The appropriation of racist ideas can have material consequences for vulnerable groups. One such consequence is the internalization of racist ideas such that BIPOC harm themselves and/or members of their own racial groups.

BIPOC may act upon deficit ideas about their own racial group that they have come to accept (consciously or subconsciously) because of their immersion in a sociocultural-historical context in which whiteness is the normative standard and Blackness is the antithesis (Dumas, 2016; Jenkins, 2021). For instance, a Black person may act upon internalized racism by straightening or cutting their natural hair because they believe that straighter, visibly long hair is prettier and/or more professional than their kinky locks. Or an Asian individual may use skin-lightening products to whiten their skin because they hold the idea that lighter skin is more beautiful than darker skin. In the context of school, an Indigenous educator who learned very little (or nothing at all) about the cultural contributions of their respective tribal community when they were a student, may come to believe that they, themself, lack the capacity to shape the world. This feeling of inadequacy can then lead the teacher to doubt their ability to be an effective educator, especially if they work in a predominantly white school where they are the only Indigenous staff member.

[1]Ideas that serve as resources for interpreting and navigating the world.

In this *Equity Dispatch,* we focus on internalized racism. We describe what it is, discuss its implications for teaching and learning, and offer avenues and resources for addressing it. We also speak briefly to the experiences of BIPOC educators who may not consciously subscribe to racist beliefs about their respective racial/ethnic groups, but nevertheless operate on those ideas for survival purposes or what they perceive as survival purposes. We encourage educators to grapple with the question, *"Is what I am doing merely a means for survival, or am I just unwilling to challenge the status quo?"*

Defining Internalized Racism

Internalized racism, or internalized racial oppression, refers to activity in which racial groups subjugated by race incorporate—within themselves—racist beliefs, values, ideologies, and images about their own group that are sustained by the dominant group and others who benefit from the status quo (Pyke, 2010). In the U.S. context, white people are the dominant ideological and political group. Internalized racism can promote self-doubt and contempt for an individual's race and/or self, holding reverence for the dominant culture (Jackson et al., 2021). For example, research on internalized racism in one teacher preparation program revealed that preservice teachers of Color who identified as women experienced racism during their K-16 schooling from peers and teachers, in both predominantly white settings, and schools where BIPOC comprised the majority (Kohli, 2014). These racist experiences led the women to feel shame about their cultural communities and view their racial groups and corresponding cultural practices as inferior. One woman—a Latina woman identified as JoAnn—described being embarrassed to speak in her college classes because her classmates stereotyped her as a *chola* (a female gangster) because of the flavor of English she spoke. JoAnn's story showed how negative feelings about one's racial identity and cultural practices develop, not out of thin air, but in response to personal encounters with racism.

Although internalized racism is socially, culturally, and historically mediated (Leonardo & Manning, 2017), it has a personal, psychological dimension. Unless an individual grants others access to their thinking, only that individual alone can determine whether they accept racist ideology. Consider a situation in which a Black teacher encourages their students to dress or style their hair in particular ways for a job interview. To an outsider, it could appear that the teacher's actions reflect a belief in white cultural values. However, from the teacher's perspective, it could be that their advice to students stems from a drive to protect their students and teach them to how to survive in the current system. In this case, the teacher would have to self-examine and unpack in what ways their practices are rooted in protection and survival, and how those practices may derive from anti-Blackness and white supremacist ideology.

Acknowledging internalized racism does not call for a widescale blaming of BIPOC for their own racial oppression. Instead, acknowledging it means recognizing the extent to which Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and other people from nondominant racial groups are vulnerable to the pervasive forces of racism. We reiterate that internalized racism is just one derivative of a larger system of white supremacist ideology that exists to keep those who deviate from whiteness at the margins of society. Further, recognizing internalized racism **does not grant white people permission to accuse BIPOC of being racist towards others or themselves**. Interrogating internalized racism is not equivalent to attempts by some members of the political right (e.g., the anti-woke movement) to whitewash history and frame BIPOC and critical white people as racist.

Why It Matters
Internalized Racism has External Consequences

[Image description: Sad Black elementary-aged, feminine-presenting student with hand on cheek and books sitting at desk in classroom.]

Internalized racism matters for possibility and responsibility. It matters for what teachers and students think is possible regarding student performance and achievement. It also matters for who and what teachers and students deem responsible for student failure and, consequently, the remedies of said failure. Below, we discuss some implications of internalized racism for teaching and learning. We organize our discussion according to the perspectives of two groups of people: teachers and students. Using hypothetical Black educators and Black students, we consider how internalized racism *may* play out among them in school.

Teachers' Perspectives

Internalized racism may mediate what teachers of Color think is possible regarding the performance and achievement of students of Color. Specifically, it may lead educators to develop deficit views about students and students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). Such thinking can then impact teachers' practices in ways that harm students of Color. Consider the following case:

> A Black educator who harbors deficit beliefs about the value of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in learning environments may find themselves criticizing and aiming to remediate Black students' use of AAVE in classrooms or hallways. The teacher, for instance, may go as far as to denounce AAVE as "improper" or "incorrect" English without examining with students AAVE's history, value, and unique linguistic structure (Smitherman, 1998). This same teacher may also have doubts about Black students' ability to meet the standards outlined in the English Language Arts curriculum or win the school spelling bee. Overall, the teacher may view Black students who primarily speak AAVE as less intelligent and capable than students whose primary way of speaking more closely aligns with Standard American English (SAE). One result is the teacher may have low expectations for those Black students and reveal those sentiments through practices such as failing, during book discussions, to ask Black students questions that require complex judgment or neglecting to talk with Black students about their college aspirations.

Internalized racism may also mediate who and what teachers deem responsible for student failure, and teachers' remedies for said failure. Internalized racism may influence teachers to blame students for the challenges the students experience, and resort to strategies intended to fix *students* as opposed to *systems*. Accordingly, educators wounded by internalized racism may lack criticality in their teaching. We return to the case of the Black teacher:

> The teacher described above may also attribute Black students' negative experiences in school and the community to the students' employment of AAVE. For example, during conversations with a student regarding the student's inability to get hired by a local business, the educator may uncritically suggest the student's linguistic performance—rather than language discrimination—is the cause for them not getting the job. Further, the educator may advise the student that AAVE is unprofessional and instruct them to adjust their verbal communication to reflect SAE as much as possible.

Consumers of this *Dispatch* might read the example above and think, "But the teacher is not wrong. Students, especially Black students, *should* adapt how they communicate if they want to be successful in this capitalist society. That's just how the world works." While we—the authors—understand this perspective, we contend that educators have a responsibility to challenge existing power relations that marginalize some ways of existing in the world while privileging others. We do not suggest educators avoid teaching marginalized students about the dominant culture and ways to navigate it. What we argue is that teachers should not tell students the normative culture (e.g., dominant ways of performing in workplace settings) *is the correct one*.

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Students' Perspectives

When educators of Color engage in activity grounded in internalized racism, their behavior may negatively impact what students of Color believe is possible regarding the students' own performance and achievement. The implicit and explicit messages students receive from this racist activity may result in students' doubting their own abilities and chances of success. Consider the following example:

> A Black student who is told by their teacher that their use of AAVE is ignorant or incompatible with formal learning environments may develop feelings of inadequacy, which could negatively impact how they perform in school. For example, a child who speaks AAVE and has grown to equate AAVE with a lack of intelligence may not study as hard as their peers for a spelling bee or avoid participating in classroom discussions because they believe they are not smart enough to do well. Such activity can create a self-fulfilling prophecy where students do not perform well because of the absence of motivation and repression of effort. Even the *fear* of being viewed as unintelligent when speaking AAVE can be detrimental to students' academic performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). A Black student who is required to give a presentation in front of the class might be so preoccupied with not sounding ignorant that they forget to communicate key information. Further, critiquing Black students' use of AAVE and limiting their learning opportunities may also alienate those children from school and drive them to feel disconnected from particular classes, or school in general.

Internalized racism may also influence students of Color to adopt an individualistic stance toward society and ignore how systems, such as the capitalist labor market, function to keep them marginalized (Galer, 2012). Repeated exposure to teaching practices and ideologies that position their cultures and ways of being as deficient and problematic may prompt students to direct their energy inward (with the goal of repairing themselves) rather than outward (to understand the ways in which humans are interdependent and challenge the ways society marginalizes some people while privileging others). To illustrate, we continue with the example of the Black student who speaks AAVE:

> The Black child who is told repeatedly by teachers that speaking AAVE is unacceptable and ignorant may blame themselves for the negative experiences they have in school (e.g., being bullied for the way they speak; being placed in special education with little supports, and with stigmatization; or performing poorly in English class). The student may also internalize the idea that only by conforming to white cultural norms can they (and other Black people) achieve success. Believing this idea can then lead the Black student to work hard to fix things about themself that appears out of sync with white culture—without a critique of the dominant culture.

In the final section, we provide some tools for addressing internalized racism. We recognize that, for some BIPOC, coming to terms with one's own internalized racism can be uncomfortable, especially if a person sees themselves as proud of their racial identity and culture and impervious to white supremacist ideology. Feelings of discomfort may drive one to deny the reality of one's biases, which does nothing to counteract internalized racism. With this in mind, we want readers to know that being uncomfortable is okay. The discomfort that emerges from holding conflicting beliefs is important for beginning the work necessary for healing from internalized racism.

> *Acknowledging internalized racism does not call for a widescale blaming of BIPOC for their own racial oppression. Instead, acknowledging it means recognizing the extent to which Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and other people from nondominant racial groups are vulnerable to the pervasive forces of racism.*

For Equity Now
Acknowledgement and Healing

[Image description: Black feminine-presenting educator staring pensively at a laptop.]

Internalized racism is an equity concern. For educators of Color, healing from the injuries of internalized racism is crucial for the construction of safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environments. Healing is a process that takes time. It does not occur instantaneously. It demands deep and continuous learning and unlearning. Ongoing participation in activities that nurture critical consciousness is the best medicine.

The first author—a cisgender Black man—can speak personally about the importance of being in ongoing conversation with oneself regarding internalized racism. During his time as a special education teacher at a majority-Black, Title I middle school, William frequently reflected on his disciplinary practices and examined whether his regulation of Black students' behavior was rooted in deficit understandings of Black cultural practices. For instance, whenever he would reprimand students for *roasting*[2] each other, he would go home and question if he intervened to protect students from perceived harm or because he viewed roasting as a "bad" practice in the same way that some people see rap music. Roasting is a linguistic practice common among Black children that involves one person playfully poking fun at another person. Roasting, like the Dozens, *can* involve the use of language that draws from racist and ableist ideologies (Lewis, 2017). Educators who engage in culturally sustaining teaching can both uphold and critique cultural practices of communities

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[2]Teasing

of Color (e.g., games like roasting and the Dozens) by immersing students in activities that allow them to celebrate such practices while identifying problematic elements expressed within those practices (Paris & Alim, 2014). Below, we provide some resources that center equity and reflexivity and push readers to consider systems of power. Educators of Color can explore these tools to begin—if they have not done so already—the process of healing from internalized racism.

- Attending to the Mental Health of Educators and Students: The Root Causes of Thriving

    This special edition of *Equity Dispatch* highlights the critical call-to-action presented by keynote speaker Dr. Christina Pate at the MAP Center's 2022 Equity Leaders Institute (ELI), entitled *Fortifying Ourselves and the Work Toward Education Justice: Attending to the Mental Health of Educators and Students.* In her talk, Dr. Pate reflected the 2022 ELI's purpose to facilitate participants' understanding of key components and practices that support mind-body wellbeing of the people – both students and adults – within our educational systems.

- Becoming an Equity-Oriented Educator Through Critical Self-Reflection

    This edition of the Equity Dispatch states that in order for educators to engage in critical self-reflection, they must move beyond a superficial understanding of self and others and reflect upon their positionality (e.g., multiple identities such as race and gender). In so doing, educators must also critically reflect upon their professional development, conversations with colleagues, lesson plans and preparation, and their interactions with students.

- Centering BodyMindSpirit in Equitable Education: Towards Pedagogies of Wholeness

    In this *Equity Dispatch* we deconstruct how cascading and collective traumas have impacted our society, and our school systems. We aim to surface how status quo approaches to pedagogy privileging intellectual knowledge over all other forms of knowledge, which contributes to, and reinforces, school-based trauma and harm. Next, we offer considerations t o redesign pedagogy informed by the concept of "wholeness" drawing from existing literature and extend through our own practices leading a regional Equity Assistance Center. Accordingly, we conclude by introducing the *MAP Center's Pedagogical Framework of Wholeness* toward realizing educator and student bodymindspirit health in the advancement of educational justice.

- Critical Consciousness for Inquiry and Critique: The DAPP Tool

    This tool is intended to help educators, leaders, teams, schools, districts, education agencies, and other organizations to engage in the type of critical reflection necessary to build critical consciousness, and undertake more equitable and just actions, toward learning, planning, and change. More specifically, we look to see how power aligns with various dominant socio-cultural identities to advantage persons with those identities, and disadvantage and exclude those without them.

- [Developing Critical Consciousness through Professional Learning](#)

    Practitioners can use the two tools described in the brief - reflection journals or blogs and critical communities of practice - to create psychologically safe spaces in which to examine assumptions and alter practices.

Despite its potency, internalized racism is not a static and incurable condition. People can learn to liberate themselves from the grasp of internalized racism with the appropriate supports (Banks & Stephens, 2018; Jackson et al., 2021). Human beings buy into racism using cultural tools and participation in activity that privileges white ways of being and sensemaking (Tappan, 2006). Thus, humans over time can also abandon their support for racist ideas via cultural tools and taking part in practices that disrupt the system and ideology of white supremacy. Building critical consciousness is fundamental to renouncing and healing from internalized racism (Jackson et al., 2021). Fostering critical consciousness includes, but is not limited to, questioning taken-for-granted assumptions of the world, interrogating one's own practices, and examining how existing power relations benefit some people while hurting others.

[Image description: Group of children of diverse ages, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and gender expression lying down in a circle.]

Meet the Authors

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