

RACE MATTERS IN SCHOOL



Welcome to Equity Digest! This newsletter is for education stakeholders (e.g., community members, caregivers) who have an interest in supporting educational equity in their school communities. What is educational equity? Educational equity can be defined as beliefs, actions, and policies that enable all students to have access to and participate in quality learning environments and experience successful outcomes. Each Equity Digest explains the concepts and findings of the latest academic research surrounding a particular equity-focused topic. The intent of this periodical is to relay equity concepts and supporting research, “digesting” key findings so you can draw informed conclusions. The Digest also offers ways that you can advance equitable practices in your school community. Enjoy!

Get Informed

Have you ever heard someone say “I don’t see race, I just see people”?

Have you said something similar to this?

If you are reading this newsletter, then you are interested in educational equity. But are you taking it to the polar opposite, unintentionally doing damage?

Would it surprise you to know that, when you think you are being just and equitable by professing to be “color neutral,” you are actually unintentionally contributing to racial oppression (Pearce, 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2002)?

Is your response to Black Lives Matter, “All lives matter”? Do you not quite understand why that’s not good to say?

People who profess to be **color neutral** believe in a **post-racial society**, where race no longer matters, and everyone should be treated as equal. However, that’s just not how society functions.

Race still profoundly impacts students of color. From the time we are born we have been socialized into a race conscious society, we have been **racialized**--taught that race matters in society and that people think about particular races in particular ways.

By the time we all reach school age, we have experienced being privileged or marginalized because of our race or ethnicity. Students of color, as well as White students are taught both explicitly and implicitly that we live in a society where white is thought to be superior.

Why You Should Care

Perpetuating a Vicious Cycle

Can't understand why students are activists for movements such as Black Lives Matter? It's up to you to develop an understanding about why students are engaging in activism for racial justice.

Race influences students' experiences in a learning setting. By your expression of color neutrality, you are engaging in racial erasure and ignoring and invalidating the inequities students of color face every day (Pearce, 2017; Fordham, 2010). Ignoring the racial identity of students directly impacts how they experience a learning environment, and not for the better (Annamma, Morrison, & Jackson, 2014).

Listen to activist students—they are trying to tell you something important.

It's time for educators and stakeholders to confront and disrupt their own participation in **systemic racism**—a set of policies and practices in school system that supports racism and white superiority. Systemic inequities are there, even if you are personally are unaware of them.

Not acknowledging racial identity, and engaging in color neutrality doesn't make racism go away as a significant social issue. You're only obscuring it. Stakeholders and educators can't help make meaningful change in the school community when they perpetuate the color neutral mentality in their language and actions (Radd & Macey, 2013).

Educators professing color neutrality and basing their practices on this concept doesn't accurately reflect reality for students of color (Pearce et. al., 2017). For these students, it makes school not a very inclusive and supportive place.

It's time for educators and stakeholders to reflect upon how they are contributing to systemic racism in schools and, in turn, preventing meaningful systemic change.

Moving Forward

If you want the best for students, recognize that students of color face racism every day, and that it is a significant part of defining who they are and what they think of themselves.

You can't support your students in their activism or move toward meaningful social change if you don't first recognize that race plays a huge role in all of our lives, often privileging White people and marginalizing students of color.

When students voice their resistance to racial injustice, honor their commitment to social justice by recognizing systemic inequities and supporting their actions to do something about it.

***It is also important to note that we are using color neutral, instead of colorblind due to the term's ableist nature (Whiteman, et.al, 2015; Annamma, Conner, & Ferri, 2013). Ableism refers to discrimination in favor of non-disabled people.**

References

- Annamma, S., Morrison, D., & Jackson, D. (2014). Disproportionality fills in the gaps: Connections between achievement, discipline and special education in the School-to-Prison Pipeline. *Berkeley Review of Education*, 5(1).
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2002). Color-blind racism: How to talk nasty about Blacks without sounding "Racist." *Critical Sociology*, 28(1-2), 41-64.
- Fordham, S. (2010). Passin' for Black: Race, identity, and bone memory in postracial America. *Harvard Educational Review*, 80(1), 4-30.
- Kuryla, P. (2011). Barack Obama and the American island of the colour blind. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 45(1-2), 119-132.
- McKenzie, K. B., & Scheurich, J. J. (2004). Equity traps: A useful construct for preparing principals to lead schools that are successful with racially diverse students. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(5), 601-632.
- Nagda, B. R. A., & Gurin, P. (2007). Intergroup dialogue: A critical dialogic approach to learning about difference, inequality, and social justice. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2007(111), 35-45.
- Pearce, N., Coomer, M.N., Dagle, C., Skelton, S.M., & Thorius, K.A.K. (2017). Empowering Students to Become Agents of Social Change. *Great Lakes Equity Center, Equity Dispatch*. Great Lakes Equity Center.
- Pollock, M. (2009). *Colormute: Race talk dilemmas in an American school*. Princeton University Press.
- Radd., S. & Macey E.M. (2013). Developing Critical Consciousness through Professional Learning. *Equity by Design Brief*. The Great Lakes Equity Center (GLEC). Retrieved from: http://glec.education.iupui.edu/assets/files/CriticalConsciousness-Brief_FINAL_1_9_2014.pdf
- Waitoller, F. R., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2016). Cross-pollinating culturally sustaining pedagogy and universal design for learning: Toward an inclusive pedagogy that accounts for dis/ability. *Harvard Educational Review*, 86(3), 366-389.
- Whiteman, R. S., Kyser, T., Bangart, S., Skelton, S.M., & Thorius, K.A.K.(2015). CoCurricular & ExtraCurricular Activities. *Great Lakes Equity Center, Equity Dispatch*. Great Lakes Equity Center.

Meet the Authors

This January 2018 issue of *Equity Digest* was written and edited by: **Diana R. Lazzell and Seena M. Skelton**

About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

Disclaimer

Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. The contents of this practitioner brief were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Grant S004D110021). However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement

A PROJECT OF  **GREAT LAKES EQUITY CENTER**

Great Lakes Equity Center
902 West New York St.
Indianapolis, IN 46202
317-278-3493 - glec@iupui.edu
glec.education.iupui.edu