

The Persistence of Race in Education – Scenario Critique

By Kenneth S. Shain

Summary. Though we often fault racism as being at the root of many of our nation’s educational shortcomings, a major reason that educational outcomes in Minneapolis consistently fail to show significant improvement, beyond those areas of study which have already been developed, is that the subject of race is not taught properly to teachers and, consequently through them and by them, to their students in the classroom.¹ It is taught as an ontology which results in an “otherization” process that replicates itself through self-classification and ultimately demotivates affected students from engaging in organized educational activities. The persistence of tolerance in our system as the primary mode of recognition of each other’s humanity² and the manifestation of “us and them” dichotomies in the racial classification system that persist despite stated legal equalities not only permit division but encourage disassociation from the classroom and estrangement of youngsters from the structured learning environment. This is a cultural problem and finds its transmission and reproduction in the practice of teachers, students, administrators, support staff, unions, taxpayers, parents and public safety officers as well as in the universities and places of learning for our educators.³ Since the primary objective of this paper is to find ways to “de-otherize” our youngsters so that they may feel part of the whole and participate in it as an essential and valued part of learning, it is critical that we understand those circumstances that have brought us to these deliberations and accurately portray the scenario we expect to address.

Background. Minneapolis to this day is a highly segregated city that never achieved reconciliation from years of redlining and exclusionary neighborhood policies that produced massive inequities in education. Despite the city's reputation as a modern-minded progressive town, the good will extended by the dominant socially liberal white community over the years has been thus far completely insufficient to address these historic inequities. Likewise for broad applications of technology, updated infrastructure and minimized class sizes. Alternating between Open Enrollment and Neighborhood School policies, the Minneapolis School District has been experimenting with district designations and neighborhood school assignments as well as transportation and mobility solutions between north and south sides of town, all of which have yielded nothing and led back to another overall district redesign, such as the current improvement process known as the MPS Comprehensive District Design 2019-2020.⁴ Because the problem is so complex, we must take great pains to see that the scenario we construct represents the problem accurately. Hence we must go back to the beginning.

Roots of the Problem. For many educators, as with most Americans, the color of skin is mistakenly taken to denote race and that race as an ontology must have preceded racism in the natural order of things. The distinction of people's colors in antiquity is often pointed to as proof, although no reference to race was ever made. Racism in modern 21st century America is more often thought of as discrimination against or dislike of a particular pre-existent race of people and that laws have been passed to protect the rights of such discriminated races. Nowadays, races themselves may be as numerous as colors with white always represented as the dominant race.

The Fallacy. But these notions are incorrect.⁵ Racism spawned race in the age of settler colonialism to justify first the taking of land and resources and then later the labor and lifeblood of a people. Settler colonialism sets in motion race as a process with which to run the alternating eliminative currents of its assimilation and exclusion machine.⁶ Practiced widely throughout the Americas, Africa

and India for over 500 years and now most effectively in Israel, with the settling of Palestine, where the fabrication of race with which to divide and dominate people developed over the years continues to demonstrate increasing levels of sophistication of self-propagation through self-justification.

On the other hand, the battle from the victim of racism's point of view is and always has been not to be recognized as a race but for recognition of their very humanity. The legacy of Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois and Martin Luther King, Jr. all point in this direction, the direction of our reclaimed humanity and a people's reunification with its whole.⁷

Remediated Responses. However, during the Cold War, our nation deemed it necessary to put its best face forward to the world and attempted to pass laws to restrict the effects of racism and grant legal status to all citizens. Unfortunately, too many southern democrats blanched at language dissolving the notion of race and were against this humanization project. What they did agree to, though, is the equality of separate and distinct races in the eyes of the law, creating the legal category for remediation and relief and ultimately the basis for identity parity with white supremacy.⁸

Doubling Down on the Problem. This of course doubled down on the problem by cynically creating an economic incentive to maintain a moribund and inhumane classification system. It permitted the dominant white majority to maintain its classification of privilege and allowed it to work around legal limitations by creating conditions within which these classifications so that they may be reproduced and reinforced, thus become limits and constraints on their own attempting to make race real. From redlining real estate we got gerrymandered school districts, poverty, environmental poisoning of neighborhood air and water, infrastructure neglect, emergence of food deserts, propagation of false histories and promotion of fake sciences and restrictions on legitimate curriculum; all became ways to make race real. Racists have also attempted to dilute authentic racist claims with new forms of discrimination and new classifications to discriminate against, attempting to turn the

matter into an arbitrage for a panoply of rights marketed in the courts as first and only venue for resolution while still using the issues as electoral wedges to rally votes or demographic data of benefit to commercial interests. This was the continuation of redlining without the red lines.

The Role of Racism in the Age of Surplus Populations. In the context of rampant automation and job displacement, population dislocations due to climate change and declining prospects for meaningful employment in the future, black (as well as brown and red) students are deep in the throes of otherization which present itself as a serious obstacle to learning. They are being marginalized at an alarming rate causing withdrawal from participation in academic activities, behavior problems, low accumulation of necessary life skills and poor scholastic performance expressed in low grades and graduation rates. A fate of incarceration or military service is the planned outcome for large sectors of our growing surplus population unprepared to face the precarity of life in the 21st century.

Failed Solutions. Many attempts have been made to address this problem. It has become so great that the school district felt compelled to establish an Office of Black Male Achievement in order to study and address the rapidly growing problem of real-world preparedness among black middle and high school males. Though the program is led and staffed by many dedicated and conscientious educators, the program itself is ultimately a form of remedial segregation and further contributes to the students' continued otherization, in this case, transformed into a collective experience. The first class of middle schoolers addressed by this program has yet to graduate hence results of its success thus far are inconclusive. Below are some other examples of attempts to overcome this problem:

Commonly, many educators and administrators believe that the solution is to celebrate the otherness of their students and design special units about what makes their race special albeit different. They believe the problem is lack of positive self-image so they compensate by trying to inject pride into their difference. This approach sets up the child for socialization into an environment of identity parity

and subjects their self-knowledge to a framework of exclusion as subordinate to the dominant “race” and its own attendant belief system imposed as white supremacy. It further reinforces race as a classification.

Other educators believe that it is important to have more teachers that look like or are the same color as the students in the classroom. They believe that this identity is required for the child to respond to prompts that do not seem threatening.⁹ But this is a flawed analysis. What children need are teachers who treat them as human beings with no intermediating issue of race to drive a wedge into a presumed blood connection. Hence the white teacher’s inability to see the black child as a little brother or sister is misinterpreted as rather the fault of the child’s need to have someone look like them do the teaching, making race real and absolving the white teacher of any responsibility in the relationship.

Similarly, the failure of the system to recruit black teachers to fill these roles is seen as one of insufficient salary rather than one of working conditions. Many black teachers leave the system because they do not feel the shared humanity of their peers, especially from those teachers who are campaigning around their own set of issues and see them as either instrumentalities or competitors in the arbitrage and resolution of rights. As understood by practitioners, diversity without equity is simply window-dressing. Black teachers in our predominantly white school system are made to feel the brunt of their own presumed race through a series of micro aggressions that play out daily. They came to teach, not help check a box.

Another problem is the maternal attitude that many well-meaning teachers bring into a classroom, attempting to forge emotional connections with their students. Many times they will refer to the students possessively as their babies, children, kids, or worse, kiddos, a phrase that lacks any emotional commitment to the child. By and large, urban youngsters resent this condescending presumption of familiarity and insinuation into their family and respond primarily to the constant supply

of Jolly Ranchers that follow rather than the true humanity required to sustain this connection, masking the failures of the teacher who may gain cooperation, but without results, once again making race real.

Another serious problem is the exacerbation of otherness that occurs when teachers seek allies within the classroom for their own causes. For instance, many LGBTQ+ advocates, aware of their own otherness, seek to further the otherness of black students in order to gain allies. As teachers, this is not appropriate and damages the child, whatever the cause. Teachers need to be the unconditional advocates of their students, whether their students support them or not. It is not a quid pro quo relationship and is not subject to intersectional arbitration or alliance protocols. Intersectionality may be useful as an electoral tool, but it is not an appropriate mechanism by which to advocate for a child's whole being.

Even the state and local unions representing teachers have attempted to develop programs to remediate this problem, advocating for inclusion, equity and racial justice.¹⁰ Invariably, these end up becoming separate but equal activities, reinforcing the operational classification vernacular and embedding in the teachers the requisite level of self-otherization required by the classification machine to transmit the same to their students. It is a very odd case of black educators accommodating the racism of their peers by organizing into separate groups to advocate their interest within the organization but powerless outside the dominant group. This process results in neither elimination nor assimilation; it is merely an attempt to preserve the status quo in the name of progress.

Many people unfamiliar with these issues oftentimes mistake what is being said here about eliminating the source of otherness as "colorblind theory." This misses the point. It is perfectly appropriate to see color or to say color, but not to see or to say race. We can recognize and celebrate our cultural, ethnic and language differences but should take care not to characterize them as racial.¹¹ De-otherization merely requires the acknowledgement of our shared and common humanity in the

construction of social relations as a necessary starting point. You might say that this paper advocates a colorful raceless society, where every shade and hue is as valued as the next.

The Way Forward. All of the aforementioned methods of engaging youngsters have been instructive failures at best or have helped perpetuate racism and racial misunderstanding at worst. Even with the best intentions, they have demotivated our youngsters and damaged their psyches and sense of acceptance even further. In the Action Plan to follow, several ideas will be set forth that may help turn this bleak situation in our schools around. As I tell my brothers and sisters at the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, “Why teach tolerance when we can teach love?”

Notes

1. Evans, Andrea. "School Leaders and their Sensemaking About Race and Demographic Change," *Education Administration Quarterly*. Vol. 43 No. 2 (April 2007) 159 – 188
2. *Teaching Tolerance*. Southern Poverty Law Center, Montgomery, AL
3. Peterson, Kent D. & Deal, Terrance E. "How Leaders Influence the Culture of Schools." *Educational Leadership*. September, 1998.
4. *MPS Comprehensive District Design: 2019-2020*. Minneapolis Special School District No. 1.
5. Cohen is quite explicit when he says, "... 'races' as imagined by the public do not actually exist." Cohen, Mark Nathan. Culture Not Race Explains Human Diversity. *Chronicles of Higher Education*. April 12, 1998. P. B4. However, it was Ta-Nehisi Coates who said, "Race is the child of racism, not its father."
6. Wolfe tells us that that race is a process and colonization the structure whereby its logic of elimination is animated historically through phases of exclusion and assimilation. Wolfe, Patrick. *Traces of History*. New York, NY: Verso Press. 2016.
7. "I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists...little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today." King Jr., Martin Luther. "I Have A Dream" Speech. Washington, DC. August 28, 1963.
8. Hader, Asad. *Mistaken Identity*. New York, NY: Verso Press. 2017.
9. Kuykendoll, Crystal. *From Rage to Hope: Reclaiming Black & Hispanic Students*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service. 1992.
10. *Facing Inequities and Racism in Education (FIRE)Program*. Education Minnesota. 2019-2020.
11. Pollock, Mica. *Schooltalk*. New York, NY: The New Press. 2017