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Combatting Race-Related Stress in the Classroom

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To support students of color, educators must understand the impact of discrimination and racism on mental health.

During the 2016 U.S. presidential election season, children heard about crowds of angry people shouting, "build the wall" or "go back to your country." In recent months, children of immigrant parents may have witnessed community raids, and many now live in fear that members of their family could be deported. Anxiety in minority communities doesn't stop there. Kids have watched videos of police officers shooting unarmed black men. Such incidents have led to riots and retaliatory violence against policemen and women who serve our towns and cities. Families watched white supremacists march in Charlottesville, Virginia, further heightening racial tensions in America. These divisive events have unsettled our nation. For students of color in particular, these images and this rhetoric underscore the persistent traumatic experience of racism and discrimination.

Educators and mental health providers must develop an understanding of how students' racialized experiences affect their mental health. Often, teachers think they are "color-blind," but with professional development, educators can learn to examine their own experiences with race and the subtle ways they may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes. This reflection helps teachers better recognize and address students' race-related stress and trauma, and can ultimately improve their academic and social-emotional functioning.

Mohammed's Struggles

Consider Mohammed¹, a 7th grade Muslim male who emigrated from Sudan five years ago. He is often withdrawn in class. At home, his family speaks Arabic and prays daily. His mother wears a head



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scarf and does not work outside the home, and his father is employed at a gas station. Mohammed carries a lunch bag with home-cooked rice and chicken to his public school. On his way to school, he notices police cars patrolling the neighborhood and officers studying him.

Mohammed enters his school through a metal detector. The lighter-skinned girls go through the security line much faster than darker-skinned boys like himself. A student makes fun of the smell of his lunch: "Man, what died in that bag?" Mohammed feels that no matter what lunch he brings, in some ways he will always be different from the other students. In other ways, he fears he will be judged by his skin color—with suspicion.

Typically, Mohammed spends most of class with his head on his desk, but today he gets out of his seat multiple times while his math teacher solves an equation on the board. Ms. Stevens, a 40-year-old white woman who is native to this city, says, "Mohammed, this is the third time. Please go back to your seat." Mohammed mutters, "You just hate *black* people." Ms. Stevens responds, "No, I don't. Go back to your seat now, or I'm sending you to the assistant principal."

Toxic Stress

Educators and mental health professionals must understand the well-documented effects of poverty and discrimination on mental health outcomes for students like Mohammed (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). When people experience poverty and discrimination, they often have increased levels of toxic stress. This stress can result in symptoms of depression and anxiety, which are often expressed as heightened vigilance. Explicit racism, such as overt acts of violence or verbal racial slurs, results in both externalizing and internalizing psychosocial symptoms, such as challenges to authority (externalizing) and withdrawal (internalizing). (Pachter & Coll, 2009; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). But even *perceived* experiences of discrimination can result in similar mental health outcomes.

A prominent study found that black middle school students' experiences with discrimination at school with both peers and teachers were negatively associated with self-reports of motivation to achieve, beliefs about self-competency, and positive self-esteem (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). These self-reports were also found to be associated with feelings of anger, depressive symptoms, and involvement in what Wong calls "problem behaviors."

As the name for these behaviors suggests, we often identify students' behaviors as "problems." But in fact, this "misbehavior" is often an externalizing symptom and may be a student's best strategy for coping with their experience. The behavior may not necessarily be linked to a particular traumatic or explicit racial incident. Rather, it may result from students' experiences dealing with perceived or implicit discrimination or racism on a daily basis. By validating students' experiences, teachers may be able to address the origin and redirect behaviors to more adaptive functioning.

Micro-aggressions: The Everyday Assault

The term *micro-aggression* was coined by psychiatrist Chester Pierce to describe "the subtle, stunning, and often automatic and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs'" (Sue et al., 2007). Racial micro-

aggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Nadal, 2012). Because they are often unconscious, identifying micro-aggressions can be challenging.

Some examples of micro-aggressions include teachers continuously mispronouncing students' names, students repeatedly being asked for IDs when entering schools, and educators being hypervigilant about the behavior of students of color in the hallways, at recess, or in the cafeteria. Additionally, white peers or teachers might indicate that they expect black students to be better at basketball or that they think Asian students don't have to study as hard for math exams, for instance. Although these off-handed comments may seem harmless, students of color can experience micro-aggressions as persistent and relentless, which can lead to greater feelings of marginalization and emotional exhaustion.

What Can Be Done?

Interactions like the one between Mohammed and Ms. Stevens may be familiar to many classroom teachers. These situations tend to escalate quickly and can be perceived by students as racist or discriminatory, regardless of their teachers' intention. But educators can develop the tools and confidence to respond to students appropriately and effectively, creating a racially sensitive classroom.

Professional development designed to promote cultural reflection, for example, can enhance educators' ability to handle race-related issues, leading students to feel more positive toward their teachers, accept constructive feedback more readily, and make academic gains. In *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race*, psychologist Derald Wing Sue argues that the ability to deal with racialized incidents requires that teachers develop an understanding of their *own* racialized identities. This greater self-awareness helps teachers competently and confidently discuss these sensitive topics with their students, even if the teachers have not endured these experiences themselves (Sue, 2015). By developing their empathy for others' experiences of discrimination, teachers can play a pivotal role in alleviating emotional distress that students face because of discrimination and racism.

Glenn Singleton (2015) has developed a field guide called *Courageous Conversations About Race* for teachers to use during staff development. Teachers and other school faculty can increase their comfort in talking about race and racism among themselves so they can understand how to talk about sensitive issues with their students, who often may not share their same experiences.

Singleton stresses that before engaging in these conversations, it is important to set norms and rules. He encourages teachers to commit to four agreements: stay engaged, tolerate discomfort, speak your truth, and expect and accept non-closure.

Once they commit to these agreements, educators can use a series of exercises Singleton offers to open the conversation and allow one another to share their race-related experiences safely with one another. The reflections begin more generally, with discussions about personal experiences, and then become increasingly focused on racialized conversations in the classroom.

Two such reflections that teachers can ask themselves are:

- Think of an experience that developed your racial consciousness. Name and reflect on the discovery.
- Can you think of a time in a personal or professional circumstance when race became a topic of conversation and you either actively changed the subject or avoided the conversation altogether? What did you believe caused you to react in this manner?

Exercises like these encourage teachers to reflect on the importance of their own racial identity in their development and understanding of who they are. If teachers reflect in this way, they might be more likely to sympathize with students who have different racial or ethnic backgrounds than their own.

Disrupting Patterns of Bias

After teachers have engaged in personal reflection, they can apply specific strategies to make students of color feel safe and comfortable in their classrooms. Dorothy Steele (2013) offers a comprehensive series of guidelines called "Identity Safe Classrooms." Steele relies on racial-identity research to create resources and activities to help teachers affirm students of different racial identities.

In one activity called "Putting Listening for Students' Voices into Practice," Steele asks teachers to complete a three-part series of exercises. Teachers are first asked to reflect on their experiences as students. What made them comfortable speaking up in class? What made them feel silenced? Next, teachers are encouraged to think about a student in their class who comes from a background different from theirs and to compare the student's classroom experiences to their own. How similar or different is that student's experience from the teacher's? Teachers are challenged to identify how that student's background and any experience of being marginalized potentially affects the student's classroom experience. Finally, to help identify and disrupt patterns of bias, teachers are asked to tally how often each student speaks in class and to analyze the participation data according to students' racial and ethnic identities.

Developing a Deeper Understanding

Ms. Stevens attended a two-part professional development session at her school on racial identity. She and her colleagues first shared experiences about their development of racial consciousness. Ms. Stevens noted that as a white female, she grew up in a neighborhood, and attended a school, that was all white. She realized she did not have a great deal of experience with issues of racial difference. She then listened to a black colleague tell a story about being stopped by police even though he had not committed a traffic infraction. Even in a supportive professional setting, he feels he must be "perfect" to obtain the basic privileges of his white colleagues. After hearing this account, Ms. Stevens thought about Mohammed—how he likely believes he is perceived and how he views himself as an immigrant

and being black.

In the second half of the professional development session, educators completed the first two tasks of the "Putting Listening for Students' Voices into Practice" activity, including reflecting on one's own classroom participation experience and how that may be different from or similar to one's students' experiences. Ms. Stevens shared that as a student, she would not speak up in class because she was afraid of how others would judge her if she didn't know the correct answer. She wondered if Mohammed felt similarly, which would explain why he typically did not participate. Ms. Stevens asked a colleague to help her complete the third part of the activity by observing her classroom and recording how frequently each student talks.

Using the data collected from the observation, Ms. Stevens noticed that white students were the most likely to offer answers to her questions in class. She also saw that most, if not all, of her interactions with Mohammed were disciplinary in nature (for instance, telling him to lower his voice or lift his head).

One day after the training, Ms. Stevens asked Mohammed to stay after class. She shared her observations that he does not participate in class and that her interactions with him tended to be disciplinary. He said that sometimes he feels invisible and other times senses that others see him as a threat because of the color of his skin; Mohammed struggled with this dichotomy. Knowing this, it's understandable why he would get frustrated at others and angry at himself. Ms. Stevens validated Mohammed's feelings and apologized if she had minimized his experiences of discrimination. Ms. Stevens shared that she grew up in an all-white community and may not always understand his experiences, but wanted to better understand him. She told Mohammed that she hoped they could keep talking.

Over time, Mohammed began to stay after class more regularly, and they talked together. Mohammed began to feel that he could trust Ms. Stevens and that she cared about him. Slowly, he began to participate more in math class and was less withdrawn. If he stood up from his chair in the middle of class, Ms. Stevens would make eye contact with him, and Mohammed would return to his chair without incident. Ms. Stevens started to see that Mohammed needed to feel a greater personal connection to her and that a sense of belonging could help him overcome his perpetual feeling of being viewed as threat or invisible due to his skin color.

Shifting the Paradigm

Given the current socio-political climate, the growing diversity gap between student and teacher, concentrated poverty and segregation, and the demands on educators to address students' social-emotional needs, classrooms today are fraught with cultural complexity. As a result, there is an urgent need for teachers to deepen their own understanding of racial identity to better address race-related issues in the classroom. If schools are meant to be places where students can learn and feel affirmed and safe, understanding the impact of discrimination and racism on mental health of students of color must be a top priority. School leadership should invest in professional development that promotes self-awareness on racial identity and helping teachers diffuse race-related conflicts instead of ignoring or dismissing the situation.

Teachers who reflect on their own racial identity with colleagues can better empathize and talk about race with an ever-growing diverse student population. By fostering this dialogue and helping students and teachers understand their reactions to the toxic effects of discrimination and racism, teachers can build stronger relationships with all students and more effectively address students' academic and mental health needs.

Video Bonus

Hear from educator [David H. Roane](#) on the importance and challenges of teachers' reflection on race-related experiences.

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Endnote

¹ "Mohammed" is not an actual individual, but a composite example drawn from our professional experiences.

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