Rx for Racism: Imperatives for America's Schools

If Americans are to embrace diversity, the conscious and unconscious expressions of racism within our society must be identified and done away with, Messrs. Pine and Hilliard maintain. For recommendations on how to accomplish this enormous task, read on.

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EVERY TIME we are almost convinced that the nation is rising above the muck of racism, there come reminders of how little headway we have made – even at eliminating the most vulgar and conspicuous manifestations of the disease. Blatant, crude, egregious, and overt racism has come out of the closet again and into our schools. Documented accounts of public slurs, threats, racist slogans, physical assaults, and racial conflicts now ring disturbingly from schools in every region of the country.[1] Schools, which ought to be a civilizing influence in our society, seem instead to be incubators of racial intolerance.   Racism, prejudice, and discrimination are shamefully sabotaging our nation's efforts to provide a high-quality education for all children.

Many American children are affected by institutional racism. Education is their best hope.

The problem of racism demands the attention of all educators. As American society rapidly grows more diverse, we must give top priority to insuring that all students receive their birthright of educational equity. Unfortunately, although America is a multicultural society, "it is not yet a pluralistic society – a place where all racial and cultural groups share equal access to opportunities for quality lives and power over their own lives."[2] To achieve pluralism, racism must be abolished, and the mission of public education must be fully achieved. That mission is to provide all students with a high-quality education that will enable them to function successfully in an interdependent, multiethnic, multicultural, and rapidly changing world. The magnitude of the task is so great that it constitutes the most significant challenge to America's system of education.

VALUING DIVERSITY

Octavio Paz reminds us that "life is plurality, death is uniformity. Every view that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life."[3]   When education takes place, every individual – teacher, student, or administrator – brings his or her cultural background to that process. Unless we educators learn to prize and value differences and to view them as resources for learning, neither whites nor minority groups will experience the teaching and learning situations best suited to prepare them to live effectively in a world whose population is characterized by diversity.

Many American children are affected by institutional racism. Education is their best hope for breaking racism's chains.   Yet, although such issues as equal opportunity, desegregation, and inequities in educational achievement have received considerable attention in recent years, very few schools have developed deliberate and systematic programs to reduce prejudice. The prevailing attitude seems to be that society has done away with the problem of racism through legislative action and

special programs.[4] But continuing instances of overt racism belie this notion, and institutionalized manifestations of racism – less blatant and thus more insidious – continue to stunt the aspirations and talents of minority children and distort the views and psyches of white children.

EDUCATIONAL INEQUITY

Despite the grave importance of educational equity in our changing society, low-income minority groups have lost ground and are in imminent danger of losing a great deal more. As Asa Hilliard has pointed out elsewhere:

> It should not require proof here that the educational outcomes are vastly different for different racial, language, economic, and gender groups in this nation. Look at dropouts, suspensions, and expulsions; look at academic achievement indices of any kind. Look at the cultural retardation of all our high school graduates, minority or majority... But most especially look at the ignorance of and alienation from their natal culture experienced by the millions of children who are on the bottom economically, socially, and politically.
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> It should also require little proof here that the process of education is vastly different for different racial, language, economic, and gender groups in the nation. Look at the scandalously disproportionate placement of students in special education categories, where low-level demands cause them to miss exposure to higher levels of educational activity. Look at the meager attempts nationally to pluralize the standard European-centered curriculum so that it conforms to the truth of all human experience, rather than reflecting a glorification of the narrow, parochial cultural experience of dominant groups.[5]

These inequities reflect the persistence of racism and bigotry in the general culture. If we have learned anything at all in the last few years, surely it is how difficult and grievous a struggle human beings have in dealing with racial differences. The effort to learn to treat one another as members of the same human family grinds on. Those who discriminate and those who tolerate discrimination are graduates of our schools. We have had our chance to teach lessons about equity and to make them a priority, but it appears that we have failed. Why? Thomas Arciniega's analysis seems to be as relevant today as it was in 1977:

> Public education has successfully shifted the blame for the failure of schools to meet the needs of minorities onto the shoulders of the clients they purport to serve. They have pulled off the perfect crime, for they can never be truly held accountable, since the reasons for failure in school are said to be the fault of poor homes, cultural handicaps, linguistic deficiencies, and deprived neighborhoods. The fact that schools are geared primarily to serve monolingual, white, middle-class, and Anglo citizens is never questioned.[6]

How will we meet the challenge of providing a high-quality education for all students in a culturally diverse society? Do we educators know how to develop healthy, prejudice-free attitudes in all our students? Can we be sure that educational practice will reflect a commitment to educational equity so that all Americans can achieve what we now falsely believe only the elite can attain?

UNDERSTANDING RACISM

In order for Americans to embrace diversity, the conscious and unconscious expressions of racism within our society must be identified and done away with. The first step is to develop an understanding of the history and nature of racism and its relationship to prejudice and discrimination. *Prejudice* consists of unjustifiable negative feelings and beliefs about a racial or ethnic group and its members. It is characterized by preconceived opinions, judgments, or feelings that lack any foundation or substance. *Discrimination* consists of unjustifiable negative behavior toward a racial or ethnic group and its members. It expresses itself in distinctions and decisions made on the basis of prejudice. *Racism* describes the combination of individual prejudice and individual discrimination, on the one hand, and institutional policies and

practices, on the other, that result in the unjustified negative treatment and subordination of members of a racial or ethnic group. By convention, the term *racism* has been reserved to describe the mistreatment of members of racial and ethnic groups that have experienced a history of discrimination.[7] *Prejudice, discrimination, and racism do not require intention.*

Racism can be thought of as a sick belief system.[8] A "healthy" belief system reflects a good match between the real world and the ideal world. A sick belief system reflects a poor match. Colonization, motivated by greed and a lust for power, depended on creating a sick belief system for both the colonizer and the colonized in order to support colonial expansion. Therefore, the concept of race was invented (conceptually separating Europeans from the people to be dominated), and racism emerged.[9]

Racism is a mental illness characterized by perceptual distortion, a denial of reality, delusions of grandeur (belief in white supremacy), the projection of blame (on the victim), and phobic reactions to differences. A colonizer may be racist, but a victim cannot be so. A victim may become pro-racist, however, which means that he or she identifies with the aggressor and initiates many racist behaviors. To make racism work it is necessary to destroy the victim's identity and to claim superiority for the oppressor. Colonizers accomplished this aim by destroying the history and the culture of their victims and rewriting history to assert their own claim to superiority.[10]

The concept of race is an evil ideological and political tool used to exploit and subordinate people of color. It has no scientific validity that would justify its use in categorizing people. Yet bigotry, prejudice, and discrimination based on the concept of race remain powerful parts of our nation's psyche and behavior. For example, a recent national survey of high school biology teachers conducted by researchers from the University of Texas at Arlington revealed that one in four respondents (the majority of whom were white males) agreed with the statement: "Some races of people are more intelligent than others."[11] Unquestionably, racism is one of the most stubborn diseases afflicting this society.

MONOCULTURAL SCHOOLS

Historically, every academic discipline – psychology, biology, geography, religion, philosophy, anthropology, literature, history – has been used to justify colonialism and racism. Under colonialism, information is rigidly controlled in several ways: it can be destroyed, distorted, fabricated, suppressed, or selectively emphasized. Those in power can also limit the access of others to information or present it in a manner designed to confuse the recipients.[12]

Schools have been dominated too long by the attitudes, beliefs, and value system of one race and class of people.

Through the omission of information, America's schools have become monocultural environments. They dispense a curriculum centered on western civilization that encapsulates only narrowly the truth, reality, and breadth of human experience. This curriculum reinforces institutional racism by excluding from discourse and from the ethos of the school and the classroom the intellectual thought, scholarship, history, culture, contributions, and experience of minority groups.[13] Schools have become sites for producing and making acceptable myths and ideologies that systematically disorganize and neutralize the cultural identities of minorities.[14] Consequently, schools – where the hearts and minds of children are shaped and controlled – have been dominated for far too long by the attitudes, the beliefs, and the value system of one race and class of people. This is not a politically, socially, morally, or economically justifiable situation in a democratic, multicultural society.

Because the U.S. system of education is built so solidly on a monocultural, Euro-American world view, it tends to benefit white students, whose cultural patterns and styles are more attuned to this world view. As white students progress through the education system and move into the world of work, the development of their cognitive styles and their

learning styles is linear and self-reinforcing. Seldom, if ever, are they required to be bicultural, bilingual, or bicognitive.

For children of color, being bicultural is not a free choice but a prerequisite for success in the education system and for eventual success in the society at large. Non-white children are generally expected to be bicultural, bilingual, and bicognitive; to measure their performance against a Euro-American yardstick; and to maintain the psychic energy necessary to sustain this orientation. At the same time, they are castigated whenever they attempt to express and validate their indigenous cultural and cognitive styles.[15]

THE CONSEQUENCES OF RACISM

The consequences of institutional racism and a monocultural education are pervasive and profound. White students tend glibly to accept the idea of equality and multiculturalism or of the superior position of their group in society without speculation or insightful analysis. They become oblivious to all but the most blatant acts of racism or ethnic discrimination and often re-label such acts as something else. They seldom give serious thought to cultural, ethnic, or racial differences or to their meaning for and influence on individuals and groups. They are subliminally socialized, enculturated, and oriented to believe that the western experience, culture, and world view are superior and dominant.[16]

> ## Solving the problem of racism must be regarded by educators as a moral imperative.

Students of color, by contrast, experience conceptual separation from their roots; they are compelled to examine their own experiences and history through the assumptions, paradigms, constructs, and language of other people; they lose their cultural identity; and they find it difficult to develop a sense of affiliation and connection to a school. They become "universal strangers" –

disaffected and alienated – and all too many eventually drop out of school.[17]

It is shameful that, more than a quarter of a century after the passage of major civil rights legislation, black children who are handed drawings of a black child and a white child will favor the white child when they are asked which child is beautiful, which child is ugly, which child is smart, which child is dumb.[18] Clearly, racism attacks a black child's very sense of self. Solving the problem of racism is America's unfinished agenda, and it must be regarded by educators as a moral imperative.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN COMBATING RACISM

How can we mobilize the education system to rescue the perishable spirit and the talent of minority children? How can education reduce and eliminate the effects of institutional racism and a monoethnic curriculum? We educators can address the problems of racism and educational equity by confronting and challenging racism, increasing the pool of minority teachers, developing and implementing a multicultural curriculum, improving pedagogical practices, elevating the self-esteem of all children, and teaching character development.

Confronting and challenging racism. Benign neglect has allowed the momentum of institutional racism to accelerate to the point of overt expressions involving totally unacceptable behaviors and actions. School policies that assert unequivocally that racism is unacceptable, will not be tolerated, and will lead to appropriate sanctions clearly establish the context for active intervention programs to counter racism. For example, in Ferndale, Michigan, the school board has developed a Human Dignity Policy that succinctly states:

> The Board of Education, recognizing that we are a multiracial, multiethnic school district, believes it is part of our mission to provide a positive harmonious environment in which respect for the diverse makeup of the school community is promoted. A major aim of education in

the Ferndale School District is the development of a reasoned commitment to the core values of a democratic society.

In accordance with this aim, the school district will not tolerate behavior by students or staff which insults, degrades, or stereotypes any race, gender, handicap, physical condition, ethnic group, or religion.

Appropriate consequences for offending this policy will be specified in the student code of conduct of each building. Staff members offending this policy will be disciplined in accordance with provisions of the appropriate employee master agreement with the School Board.[19]

Such a policy leaves no doubt about the determination of a school district to address racism.

To augment clearly stated policies, intervention programs must be established to challenge prejudice, discrimination, and racism. The study of the history, purposes, and dynamics of racism must be recognized as a valid endeavor. An examination of stereotyping in the media, in textbooks, and in the popular culture ought to be included in the curriculum. Every controversial issue associated with racism needs to be studied, discussed, debated, and critically confronted.

Racism cuts deep into the psyche. Discussions and debates about racism create anxiety and conflict, which are handled differently by different cultural groups. For example, whites tend to fear open discussion of racial problems because they believe that such discussions will stir up hard feelings and old hatreds. Whites tend to believe that heated arguments about racism lead to divisiveness, loss of control, bitter conflict, and even violence.

Blacks, on the other hand, believe that discussion and debate about racism help to push racial problems to the surface – and, perhaps, force society to deal with them. As Thomas Kochman has noted, "Blacks believe that differences can only be worked out by engaging in struggle, even if the arguments resulting from such engagement become heated. . . . Consequently blacks conceive the

danger of violence as greater when people are not communicating than whey they are."[20]

Such differences in dealing with conflict suggest that, to confront racism in a free and open discussion, students and teachers will have to develop assertiveness, listening skills, group problem-solving skills, and effective strategies for conflict resolution. Dealing with stereotypes, biases, and differing personal values and constructing a climate that fosters intergroup interaction and understanding are complex efforts that demand sensitivity and empathy.

Clearly, staff development for administrators, teachers, and support personnel is imperative. Such staff development programs should be designed not to put people on the defensive but to empower them to understand and address the unconscious and overt effects of the institutional racism that pervades all facets of society.

We are engaged in a long-term struggle. Racism and other forms of prejudice and discrimination will not be eliminated in a day or a week or as a result of one workshop. Intervention programs must be sustained efforts. To turn schools into communities of conscience will require a coherent, comprehensive, and strategic plan that interweaves school policy and active intervention and that is accompanied by a sense of urgency and mission.

Increasing the pool of minority teachers. As America's classrooms are beginning to serve a rapidly expanding proportion of minority students, the pool of candidates for teaching positions is becoming increasingly white. Over the coming decade, the proportion of minority teachers in the public schools will drop from 12% 5%. At the same time, the minority student population will increase to 33%.[21] Diversity within the public school faculty is a pedagogical necessity, not merely a matter of fair play in the labor market. There are at least two major reasons to insure cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity in America's teaching force. First, the existence of differences among teachers is itself an equity lesson for students, who must be taught respect for and understanding of people from groups other than their own. Second, children of all racial and ethnic groups must have access to attractive

role models.[22] It is unequivocally clear that the minority teacher as a role model is important both to white students and to students of color, and the importance of such role models will grow as the population of the United States continues to change.

When minority teachers make up a small percentage of a school's teaching staff, they are in triple jeopardy.[23] First, because they lack contact with minority colleagues, those in the majority interpret the behavior of minority teachers through racial and ethnic stereotypes. They more readily attribute the behavior of minority colleagues to ethnic or racial characteristics than to such individual factors as personality or background. Second, when a teaching staff is strongly skewed toward members of the majority group, the evaluation of performance is consistently (if subtly) biased against minority teachers. Third, members of the majority group often misunderstand affirmative action and assume that those who benefit from it are less competent and less deserving.

It follows, then, that simple representation of minorities does not guarantee a truly diverse teaching staff. Research indicates that numbers matter – that the quality of life in an institution improves for minority group members as their proportion in the overall population increases. The rate of inclusion of minority group members influences the extent to which they can realize equal opportunity and equal treatment and the extent to which members of the majority group can free themselves from stereotypical thinking and prejudice.[24]

Recent research suggests that 20% is the minimum rate of inclusion required to diffuse stereotypes and other negative factors affecting minority members of organizations.[25] If by the year 2000 one-third of all school-age children in America will be members of minority groups, is it too much to ask that we aspire to having a teaching force reflecting a similar distribution?

Developing and implementing a multicultural curriculum. If we are in the "business" of educating people, then we are in the business of communicating truth and reality – of telling the complete story of history and human experience. That means that we must learn how to tap the rich vein of cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity to improve education for all children. A multicultural, gender-fair, nonparochial curriculum is essential if students are to broaden their understanding of their own cultures and of cultural diversity.

We must learn how to tap the rich vein of cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity to improve education for all.

We need to incorporate into the curriculum another story, a nonwestern story of the world. Education has long been used to create distorted perceptions and beliefs about minority groups. By leaving out nonwestern history, culture, and ideas, we have falsified education for everyone. Schools need to integrate into all curricular areas the ideas, the literature, the contributions, and the history of minority groups. A curriculum based on truth and reality can provide students with a sense of continuity, of self-esteem, and of identity. Portland, Oregon, has developed such a curriculum.[26]

As Glenn Pate has pointed out, a genuinely multicultural approach that permeates the K-12 curriculum – horizontally and vertically, in all subject areas – and that is supported by high-quality instructional materials is far more effective than "add-on" programs designed to reduce prejudice, elevate self-esteem, and enhance learning. Programs that are added on to the regular curriculum are viewed as supplementary. They do not effectively attack students' prejudices, may be seen as patronizing, and may be implemented in such a way that they alienate both majority and minority students.[27]

In his review of approaches to a multicultural curriculum, James Banks noted that, while add-on programs can be used as steppingstones to more intellectually challenging approaches, they do not involve a restructuring of the curriculum. Thus they often trivialize ethnic cultures; they tend to evade significant issues, such as racism, poverty, and oppression; and they view ethnic content from the perspective of mainstream historians, writers, artists, and scientists.[28] An effective multicultural curriculum is achieved when we

change the basic assumptions of the curriculum; enable students to view concepts, themes, issues, and problems from several ethnic perspectives; and infuse throughout the curriculum the frames of reference, history, culture, and perspectives of various ethnic groups. Such an approach extends students' understanding of the nature, development, complexity, and dynamics of a multicultural, pluralistic society and leads them to social action and decision-making that reduce prejudice and discrimination in their schools.

Genuine multicultural education demands a major commitment of time, energy, and resources. Developing appropriate materials, collecting resources, conducting historical research, and integrating multicultural content into all parts of the curriculum require sustained effort. Such effort can be regarded as a measure of authentic commitment to educational equity. A curriculum that honors and values the rich contributions that culturally diverse groups have made to society and to civilization is the foundation on which to build interactive, multicultural, gender-fair communities of learning.

Improving pedagogical practice. Jeannie Oakes points out that we have made two critical errors in our thinking about equity and excellence in education. First, in looking for solutions to educational
problems, we have focused our attention on the individual circumstances of children (e.g., home environment, heredity, culture) rather than on content and processes within the schools. And second, we have failed to acknowledge that the schools cannot be described as excellent as long as large numbers of students pass through or leave them without having their educational needs satisfied.[29]

The widespread academic failure of children from certain ethnic populations is a national disgrace.

Excellence in education should be viewed as a combination of intellectual rigor, challenging content, and effective pedagogy.[30] Equity means that every child has access to educational excellence and that every school is a delivery system that enables each of its students to derive the full benefits of intellectual rigor, challenging content, and effective pedagogy.

The widespread academic failure of children from certain ethnic populations, in the face of clear demonstrations that such failure is totally avoidable, is a national disgrace. The traditional pedagogical approaches and educational delivery systems that have been used to deal with at-risk minority students have often proved to be dysfunctional and anachronistic. They have tended to be rigid, uncreative, and characterized by low expectations.[31]

For example, there is little evidence to support the basic assumptions of tracking. Indeed, research findings demonstrate that the net effects of tracking are to exaggerate initial differences among students, to harm poor and minority students disproportionately, to deny students equal access to knowledge and understanding, to place black and Hispanic children in low-ability and non-college-bound groups, and to widen the educational gap between the haves and the have-nots.[32] In view of the overwhelming evidence that tracking contributes to educational inequity, its practice should be abandoned.

However, instead of witnessing the demise of tracking, we are now confronted with well-intended but misguided proposals and legislative initiatives calling for school choice. The inevitable outcome of school choice would be the creation of large-scale tracking systems. Equal funding of high-quality education for all children obviates the need for school choice. We do not need school choice as much as we need choice schools that are characterized by challenging curricula and effective pedagogy – characteristics too often found wanting in schools serving large numbers of minority students.

Underachieving minority students are likely to be assigned to less-experienced teachers who have mastered fewer pedagogical strategies. These youngsters are given mind-numbing worksheets that stress isolated skills, but they are not given opportunities to apply these skills to authentic problems. Perhaps the most striking bias in schools is the restricted access of

minority students from low-income families to rigorous academic work. At-risk minority students are more likely to be presented with lessons that are shaped by a behavioral or a training perspective and that focus on low-level skills, fragmented knowledge, and easily tested facts.[33]

Improved pedagogical practice springs from the belief that all children – regardless of their cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds – can learn. Effective pedagogy is characterized by high expectations, sensitivity to cultural patterns, and successful communication to and motivation of students. Cooperative learning and interracial learning groups are good examples of pedagogical practice that has not only improved students' academic achievement but also facilitated cross-ethnic and cross-racial friendships.[34]

Many educators have produced high-quality results with all children, including those identified as at-risk. Reuven Feuerstein's "dynamic assessment and instrumental enrichment" has been used successfully for 30 years with at-risk children – yet it has not attracted the interest of many teacher educators, nor is it found in the repertoire of most classroom teachers. Preservice teachers must be exposed to settings in which children who normally fail are successful. Preservice teachers will never believe that all children can succeed academically unless they themselves have the chance to teach children successfully in settings where they fear failure.[35]

Studies have consistently shown a significant correlation between low self-esteem and prejudice.

Teaching character development and improving self-esteem. Studies have consistently shown a significant correlation between low self-esteem and prejudice.[36] When we are able to increase students' self-esteem, there is an accompanying decrease in prejudice. Probably one of the most effective actions schools could take to improve intergroup relations would be to help students develop strong self-concepts.[37] Deliberate psychological education programs can produce positive self-concepts and elevated self-esteem. However, overreliance on such programs is not justified by recent research, which indicates that self-esteem does not cause – but is an effect of – academic success.[38] Increases in self-esteem are preceded by gains in competence; this suggests that high expectations and effective pedagogical practices that foster academic achievement will generate positive self-concepts and enhanced self-esteem.

If we believe that the goals of the schools are to make all children intellectually competent and to foster decency in their interpersonal relations, then our concerns about increasing students' self-esteem need to be viewed in the context of the overall development of character. Schools must institute programs to protect children from the ravages of social and family disorganization. In today's complex world, all students need more support from the schools than they needed in the past. This is especially true of minority students, who "have experienced the most cultural discontinuity and destruction of their organizing and stabilizing institutions and practices, as well as forced exclusion from education and other developmental opportunities."[39] Schools can offer young people meaningful cocurricular and extracurricular activities that will expand and enrich their lives and simultaneously extend the school's socializing influence. A major goal of socialization should be to promote civic virtue and those qualities that enable children to become productive and dependable citizens in a just society.[40]

Schools need to revitalize their approaches to the teaching of civic virtue. The duties of citizenship in a democracy; the rules of interpersonal civility; the nature of equity and justice; and the morality of caring for the weak, the poor, and the disenfranchised are all concepts that can be taught in the classroom.[41] Through cocurricular and extracurricular activities and appropriate coursework, schools can foster the development of psychological and social traits of character: self esteem (integrity, consistency); self-discipline; vocational aspiration (work as a calling, not a job); idealism; moral judgment; and interpersonal expectations (including altruism, enlightened self-interest, and social justice).

TO BECOME moral communities that are supportive and caring, schools need to model empathy, altruism, trust, cooperation, fairness, justice, compassion, democracy, and celebration of diversity. In schools, the quality of communal caring and the sense of community conscience are largely defined by the degree of harmony and mutual respect between white and minority groups. Harmony and mutual respect are measured by how well we live the values we teach and how fully we practice the ideals to which we are committed. Caring and just schools – characterized by intervention programs to counteract racism, by diverse teaching staffs, by truly multicultural curricula, by appropriate pedagogical practices, by high expectations, and by continuing emphasis on the development of character and self-esteem – are essential to the achievement of genuine educational equity and to the elimination of institutional racism.

The agenda of imperatives that we have prescribed is demanding, challenging, and complex, but it is commensurate with the nature and urgency of the problem confronting American education. The effects of racism that plague the lives of minority children are more than personal problems. They damage not only the health and welfare of children, but the character of our society, the quality of our civilization, and our prospects for the future. Our children are our future – *all* our children.

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