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Confronting the Racism of Low Expectations

Racism in educators' attitudes—and in how students are placed in advanced classes—still robs minority students of chances for success.

Julie Landsman

In an affluent suburb of New York City, in the midst of large backyards and roses along stone walls and the kind of broken beauty I have always loved from my own childhood there, a black man sits at the breakfast table with his two sons, ages 7 and 9. He looks from one to the other and, with great seriousness and hope, tells them they are spectacular boys. As he does every morning, he tells them they can do anything in this world, dream any dream. Then the boys finish breakfast and go off to the nearby elementary school.

The father has created this daily ritual because he believes that his sons will spend the next six to seven hours being given the opposite message. He is a rich man and has worked in corporate America most of his life. He loves this part of New York and its excellent, well-appointed schools. But he and his family are taking a gamble living here. The cost is great, not just in terms of property taxes, but in terms of potential damage to his sons' psyches. As one of only two or three students of color in each of their classes, these boys have a good chance of being objects of curiosity and condescension, or victims of low expectations. Daily encouragement is this father's way of countering assumptions that his sons are likely to face in school: that they cannot do the work assigned, that they do not come from a functional family, and even—tucked back in a teacher's subconscious—that they are innately less intelligent than their white peers.

Racist Attitudes: Subtle and Overt

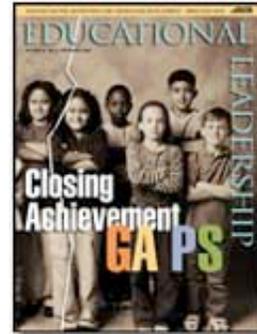
I have run into many parents like this man during the two years since the publication of my book, *A White Teacher Talks About Race*. All over the United States, from small towns to gated suburbs to "inner-ring" districts to inner-city schools, I have listened to parents, teachers, administrators, and students verify the truth of this father's observations. Principals have told me about teachers who say openly that black boys are impossible to work with because they are hyperactive and uncontrollable. These same teachers ignore the behavior of white boys who act out. Teachers have told me that they avoid their faculty lounge because the talk behind closed doors is offensive to them, full of negative assumptions based on race. One teacher told me it is like "witnessing the chances for kids diminish right before your eyes."

Students in one St. Paul, Minnesota, high school talked about a teacher who asked the white kids in an advanced placement class the tough questions but turned to the few black or Latino students when she had an easy question that "anyone could answer." When confronted with this situation, the teacher was stunned. She realized it was true and admitted, "I just assumed you didn't know the answers, and I didn't want to embarrass you." This assumption—that black or Latino students could not possibly know the answers to deep or complex questions—is at the crux of the racism still embedded in many teachers' belief systems. This racism is so subtly expressed that students often cannot put into words what they clearly sense is wrong.

I saw racist attitudes come out in the open when I taught a class in multicultural education at a college in Northfield, Minnesota. A white student, doing well in her junior year at this academically tough school, wrote in a final paper,

It is good I took this class from you, because before I took it, I thought all black people were stupid because they let themselves be slaves.

This intelligent young woman was heading into the final year toward attaining her teaching licensure. Yet somehow she had nearly completed her school career believing in the innate inferiority of a whole people.



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Unless educators face the facts that these examples reveal, we will not be able to change this broken system. I believe that a true test of any country's morality is whether it gives all children a fair and equal chance to achieve their potential as human beings. The extent to which a society is meeting this challenge is reflected in the way its schools track students—in the way giftedness and intelligence are defined. How are students chosen for advanced placement classes? Once they enroll in a class for high-achieving students, are they made to feel welcome or unwelcome? Are they seen as potential leaders or potential dropouts?

I have visited school districts that claim to have dealt successfully with a culturally diverse student body. But when I visited their advanced placement classes, or gifted services, or the International Baccalaureate program, I found mostly white students with a sprinkling of black, Latino, or Asian American students. Whole corridors house these classes; thus whole corridors in the building are filled with white kids going from AP History to AP English to IB Math. The white youth go through their day in a white ghetto in the middle of an "integrated" school.

Recently, I spoke at a ceremony inducting students into the National Honor Society of an urban high school in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Of 80 youth being admitted to this privileged leadership group, I counted five of color. Yet approximately 60 percent of the students at the school were not white. One teacher told me that the distribution was better than in past years, when no students of color had been inducted.

Yet we know there are smart, talented students of all races. I have worked with gifted high school students in programs for kids in trouble, and with brilliant gang members in alternative schools. Let me tell you about a teacher and his former student who now go around the Twin Cities speaking to education classes. This student, whom I will call Jamal, was defiant, obstreperous, and difficult in class. He came from a black family that many teachers openly dubbed a "problem family." One day Jamal threatened his teacher, whom I will call Tony. Jamal swore and stomped out of class. Tony, a white man, called the office, reported the incident, and arranged to meet with Jamal and the principal later that day.

At the meeting, Jamal was sullen, rarely looking Tony in the eye. The principal asked Tony what he needed from Jamal to allow him to return to class. At this point the teacher looked directly into his student's eyes and said, "I need Jamal to be in my class for gifted students. He is too smart for the class he has been assigned to now." This response changed Jamal's life. He came to the more advanced class and—with the support of his teacher, his parents, and the community—began to take school seriously.

Rethinking Definitions of "Gifted"

It is time to rethink how we define and, accordingly, place students. I'm disturbed by how teachers, even in their own minds, classify students at young ages on meaningless grounds. Students in my education classes, most of them white, told me that they could tell by 2nd grade which students in their schools were headed for college and which were not. The kids they branded as heading to college were almost all white. All were wealthy or middle-class.

Entrance into many top-track programs in schools is subtly based on acquaintance with certain authors, certain ways of reasoning, and certain ways of behaving. To be eligible for the best education in this country, you often have to have money, books in the home, the desire and training to sit in one place all day, and an acquaintance with white middle-class and upper-class cultural icons. The result is that whole schools are full of smart African American boys, for instance, who have not made it into these programs. Teachers, counselors, social workers, and principals have determined that they are not bright enough, or they have the wrong attitude, or they are from a dysfunctional family and won't be able to get the support they need at home.

We must address the racism involved in the process of selecting students for gifted education and for tracked programs. Yet when confronted with the lack of students of color in advanced programs, many educators struggle to find any rationale they can other than the truth: The system that sets up the hierarchy of intelligence and excellence is racist.

Steps for Change

Where do educators go from here? We go to work for radical change. We need to rethink our entrance requirements, the way we teach, our expectations, and our relationship to the communities that many of our students come from. We are sure to meet resistance. Some teachers in training tell me, "I won't need to worry about all this stuff because I will be teaching in white schools." They are missing the entire point of anti-racism work, yet theirs is not an unusual attitude. I have faced audience resistance to my message during many presentations. But I believe that countering such resistance and bringing about change is possible.

Joseph White and James H. Cones, authors of *Black Man Emerging* (1999), suggest that to confront and combat racism, people need to change their lives in three ways: by exploring racism intellectually, by engaging in

dialogue, and by immersing themselves in an unfamiliar culture. I believe we also need to work for change by creating safe classroom environments and committing ourselves to activism.

Exploring the Issues Intellectually

Educators need to study, go to conferences, and voraciously read books about racism and minority cultures. I recommend meeting once a month in small groups with a trained leader to discuss selected books or listen to speakers. A group called SEED (Seeding Educational Equity and Diversity) has developed a method for exploring these issues through literature and self-examination (Nelson & Wilson, 1998).

Reading and reflecting in small groups helps us—particularly white educators—open our minds and examine assumptions and behaviors that can do much harm. Do we ask the black kids the easy questions without realizing it? Do we refrain from calling home when we are concerned about a Latino student because we assume she does not have a functional, literate family who can respond? How can we change our assumptions and practices?

Engaging in Dialogue

Teachers need to meet with parents, members of the community, students, and colleagues to discuss racism in our schools, our cities, and our states. Through dialogue with our students and their communities, we may find ourselves looking at learning, cooperation, and achievement in a more complex, interesting way. And when the going gets tough—when words are exchanged that hurt or are hard to hear—we need to take a break and then begin again. Students of all races talk together like this all the time, and they can model persistent and fearless dialogue for us. Friendships, reconciliation, and enlightenment come from their interactions.

When teachers meet and really talk with the families of their students—in their homes, on their front porches, in community meeting places—school can also become a place where real exchanges happen, where students feel welcome in their classes, and where visitors from diverse neighborhoods feel needed and wanted. One principal in St. Paul has her teachers go out in pairs every fall to visit her students' homes. At first teachers were hesitant, but after the first day of this work, they agreed that it was the best way they could spend their time. Parents told the principal that these visits made them feel they were being listened to and made them feel more inclined to come into the school.

It is doubly important that teachers of AP classes reach out to the communities of those students who rarely make it into their programs. I guarantee they will find students who do not feel welcome, who do not envision themselves as "gifted kids" because they believe that intelligence and giftedness are always defined in white terms.

There is no end to the creative ways we can break down barriers between minority cultures and white educators—or break through white educators' assumptions about minorities. For example, parents of Asian American immigrant students and African American students in St. Paul complained that the gifted program in their city schools used definitions of giftedness that favored students from middle-class, white backgrounds. Instead of dismissing their complaints, the district administration studied the issue. They found that although approximately 60 percent of students in the district were students of color, only 15 percent of the students in gifted programs were students of color; the rest were white. The school adopted a new test for giftedness that did not rely on verbal or English language ability, but tested for creative problem solving, divergent thinking, and artistic talent. After this change, the racial composition of this program came closer to district demographics.

Immersing Ourselves in Other Cultures

So many of us stick together, stay in our neighborhoods, and rarely venture into a synagogue if we are Christian or a Kwanzaa celebration if we are white. The area around Minneapolis-St. Paul has the largest population of Hmong students in the United States, and every year a huge celebration for Hmong New Year takes place in the Twin Cities. Rarely do you see anyone but Hmong families at this celebration. Yet it is essential for those of us who are in the racial majority to go out of our comfort zones and get a sense of what many of our students go through every day.

By immersing ourselves in another culture, teachers also begin to perceive the world in a new way, to understand the intricacy of culture and the complexity of worldviews. As a result, we may no longer define giftedness in a simplistic, monocultural way.

Creating a Safe Environment

As teachers and administrators, we need to make sure that all students feel protected in every class they

attend. They need to know that someone is keeping the emotional, intellectual, and physical climate of their classroom safe, and that if anyone engages in racist comments, hurtful assumptions, or name calling, the teacher will step in.

In some ways, keeping our own personal actions welcoming and nonracist is the toughest part of this task because it has to do with how we think and react instinctively when we are working with students—how we turn our shoulder or change our tone of voice. As a coteacher and a poet in the schools, I have watched teachers demand the best from all their students while at the same time filling the room with laughter and relaxation. Teachers can only do this when they operate on a basic assumption that all the students in front of them have their own gifts and the potential to make changes in the world.

The best teachers are those who have explored how their own background and experience of the world is different from that of others, and have reflected on how that difference affects their beliefs, their personal reactions, and their teaching. Once white teachers, in particular, accept that their experience is just one of many experiences of being an American, they become more open, more able to deal with cultural issues that come up in the classroom.

When teachers create classrooms that are safe and yet leave room for creative classroom projects, giftedness emerges from places we did not anticipate. After reading black poetry to students, we may find that an angry young man in our 10th grade English class suddenly shines at writing. We may consider him for classes that we thought beyond his reach before he was exposed to authors from his culture.

Committing Ourselves to Activism

For too long I have heard educators say that to keep white students in a particular school district, we must provide more gifted programs. The racism behind this assumption is astounding: It implies that only white kids are gifted, or that we should tailor our definition of giftedness to white culture. Unless teachers refuse to accept this kind of assumption and are willing to speak out loud and clear against such thinking, we will not change anything. Unless we are willing to form alliances with parent groups representing low-income or minority kids—like those in St. Paul who challenged the district's definition of giftedness—we are part of the problem, not part of the solution. Friends of mine who are not white tell me that whites seem to want to talk about change, but when it comes to working for it, speaking up or organizing the community, white faces are often absent. Teachers cannot sit back and wait for such necessary changes as smaller classes and more even distribution of resources to happen. It is up to all of us to make changes in our environments and to advocate systemwide and nationwide progress toward a more equitable system.

Teachers often want to change things quietly, politely, behind closed doors. I understand that feeling, having a certain amount of the introvert in me, yet we can no longer give in to this desire for an orderly solution. Real change can be loud, messy, and time-consuming. If we see racism—in the way our district defines and tests for giftedness, in the way advanced classes are filled, or in the school curriculum—we must raise our voices.

One way to start is to look into our schools and identify evidence of exclusiveness and racism. I have developed a questionnaire that teachers and administrators can use to measure how well their school communicates respect for all cultures and high expectations for all students (see "Does Your School Have High Expectations for All Students?").

I have great hope for our system of education. If educators read and reflect, engage in ongoing dialogue, immerse ourselves in other cultures, create safe classrooms, and challenge racist definitions of intelligence, then schools will stop using racist assumptions to determine a child's potential.

Then, perhaps, the man in the New York suburb will not feel so alone in his dreams for his sons.

Does Your School Have High Expectations for All Students?

- Are examples of the achievements and ideas of diverse authors, thinkers, and historical figures woven into—not separated from—the curriculum?
- Are texts, lessons, and discussion topics chosen with thought about how to provide a safe environment for discussion of controversial issues?
- Do all students feel safe in the classrooms, hallways, and lunchroom?
- Does the school challenge anyone making generalizations about racial and ethnic groups?

- Is evidence of diverse cultures displayed in hallways, in the library, in classroom examples, and in the racial and cultural backgrounds of adults working in the building?
- Does the school take students' and parents' discomfort, frustration, or anger seriously? Are issues worked out through mediation and discussion?
- Do teachers expect *all* students to complete and turn in work, know the answers to different levels of questions, work in class, follow class guidelines, and respond to structure?
- Do parents of color feel welcome at conferences, parent advisory group meetings, and school events?
- Do students of all ethnicities represented in the school participate in all academic courses and programs?
- Are students of color counseled to consider high-level academic programs and college?
- Are administrators and teachers willing to counter racist comments?
- Do teachers value inclusive curriculum even when the school is primarily populated by white students?
- Do teachers and staff members feel they can openly discuss issues of race, class, and gender without feeling defensive or ashamed?

—Julie Landsman

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