

Institutional Racism in Schools

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Introduction

We need to recognize that institutional racism is silently tearing at the fiber of our schools and our society. It is not simply an "inconvenience" for a statistical minority.

Evelyn Hanssen

Defining the term “Institutional Racism” is a challenge by itself. According to the Oxford Dictionary (2018), institutional racism is a “racial discrimination that has become established as normal behavior within a society or organization”. Solid Ground (n.d.) expands the definition to “the systematic distribution of resources, power and opportunity in our society to the benefit of people who are white and the exclusion of people of color”. (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985) states that institutional racism is “the consistent allocation of resources in a way that advantages one racial group at the expense of others” (Taylor & Clark, 2009). Although the definitions vary in terms of words chosen, some words do stand out: discrimination, distribution of resources, behavior, power, opportunity, exclusion, advantage, racial groups. As pointed out by Taylor & Clark (2009, pg. 115), “researchers describe institutional racism as subtle (Keleher & Johnson, 2001), even invisible (Pence & Fields, 1999), escaping conscious awareness of the dominant class (Obach, 2000) and insidious in its effect (Lynn, 1999)”. This statement justifies the need for further research, understanding, identification of reasons and the effort to find solutions for this recurrent problem in our society. Black and white inequalities are a well-known issue that has not been taken care of. Unfortunately, the same mistakes are being made with Hispanics, immigrants, and the long list of minorities that the society insists in overlooking or despising. Institutional racism is in every sector in this society, including schools. “Black children make up 18 percent of the pre-school population are three times more likely to be suspended than white

children” (Nesbit, 2015). The fact that institutional racism is a reality in schools nationwide and an overlooked issue.

The aim of this paper is to bring an overview of such issues in the school sector, analyze what researchers have identified, review statistics and develop a rationale on the importance of a multicultural education in which individuals are seen as unique, that need to be understood, respected and offered equal opportunities and not sabotaged.

Challenging the Comfort Zones

Perception is a key word in any discussion. Along with it go experience, belief and upbringing. Most studies and researches define and analyze racism through privileged lenses. To know what racism is and what it feels like it is necessary to, at least, be able to put ourselves in the situation or circumstances of the disadvantaged ones.

Joseph et. al (2016) carried a study called *Black Female Adolescents and Racism in Schools: Experiences in a Colorblind Society*. They interviewed 18 black adolescent and their answers show their perception of racism. Here are some excerpts:

Tallah reported that racism is “prejudice against someone of a different race, or your same race, or any race.” Tallah conceptualized racism as unfavorable opinions, feelings, and attitudes toward another group of people whose “race” is the same or different.

Jaclynn described racism as “discrimination, and to go along with that, when people make you feel like you aren’t good enough or you aren’t equal, or don’t include you in certain things because of what you look like.”

Vantrice stated that racism means “when you are treated differently, people react to you differently, or look at you differently just because of the color of your skin. Usually in a negative way.”

Evette commented that racism is when “one race hates another race,”

Rhianna pointed out that racism is when someone is attacking a certain race.

According to **Kishana**, teachers need to think in different ways about how students might learn and think. She also felt they need to have more training on how to work with students to learn the material well. Additionally, she called for a massive reform movement to “wipe all the teachers out” in order to change their mindset and promote the idea that more teachers of color would be beneficial for students of color.

The underprivileged is doomed to fail from birth through their entire life just because of their skin color. Historically, policies and practices are defined by the privileged, because the minority are hardly able to reach the top of the chain of command without resources and decent education. White privilege is a fact, a legacy resulting from historic inequities. “Colonialism, slavery and Jim Crow laws were all sold with junk science and propaganda that claimed people of a certain “race” were fundamentally different from those of another” Collins (2018). Racism leads to inequalities and ultimately to systemic racism that favors the privileged.

Although it is unfair to generalize and state that the white privileged is unable to sympathize, understand and raise a flag to the underprivileged, many choose not to acknowledge the issue or are simply not comfortable discussing it. People tend to be more comfortable around people and ideas which they are familiar with. In addition, it is challenging and insidious to

“admit much prejudice and stereotyping are going on beneath the level of awareness” (Lambert, 2017) in (Cooperman, 2017). To enforce policies and practices, the first step should be to get to know the ones who will be directly affected by them. To study their history, their culture and beliefs. It is unrealistic to think one system will fit all, therefore, further investigation on needs is necessary to decide on a system everyone can benefit from.

According to Came & Humphries (2014), “institutional racism is similarly difficult to notice, and also to not-notice once we have been made aware of its pervasiveness”. The authors challenge the topic asking, “how can we make the seemingly invisible, more visible, particularly when, in the trying, we make people uncomfortable (Kirton, 1997)?”. The answer perhaps is to challenge the comfort zones.

Unseen Figures

After the letters, numbers are the second most important thing we learn as a child. Numbers serve to count, measure, score, record etc., you can count. A more elaborate way to analyze numbers is through statistics. In theory, one of the ways statistics is useful is by keeping us informed about ranking, strengths, and deficits in education for instance. Nevertheless, racism is still one of the areas in which statistics do not have a weight, significance or importance. “In societies that are structured in racial domination, such as the US and UK, quantitative approaches often encode particular assumptions about the nature of social processes and the generation of educational inequality that reflect a generally superficial understanding of racism” (David, 2010). Nesbit (2015) in his article *Institutional racism is our way of life* for the US News & World Report brings statistical information on institutional racism to prove his thesis that institutional racism exists in America:

- Black preschoolers are far more likely to be suspended than white children. Black children make up 18 percent of the pre-school population but represent almost half of all out-of-school suspensions.
- Black students make up almost 40 percent of all school expulsions, and more than two thirds of students referred to police from schools are either black or Hispanic, says the Department of Education.
- Even disabled black children suffer from institutional racism. About a fifth of disabled children are black – yet they account for 44 and 42 percent of disabled students put in mechanical restraints or placed in seclusion.
- About 73 percent of whites own homes, compared to just 43 percent of blacks. The gap between median household income for whites (about \$91,000) compared to blacks (about \$7,000) is staggering, and that gap has tripled in just the past 25 years. The median net worth of white families is about \$265,000, while it was just \$28,500 for blacks.

A good visual representation for inequalities and gaps is a funnel. From K-12 to advanced education, the number of people coming out of that funnel decreases considerable and those are seen by the society as “exceptions”. This can be observed in figures one and two, according to

numbers from the Department of Education.

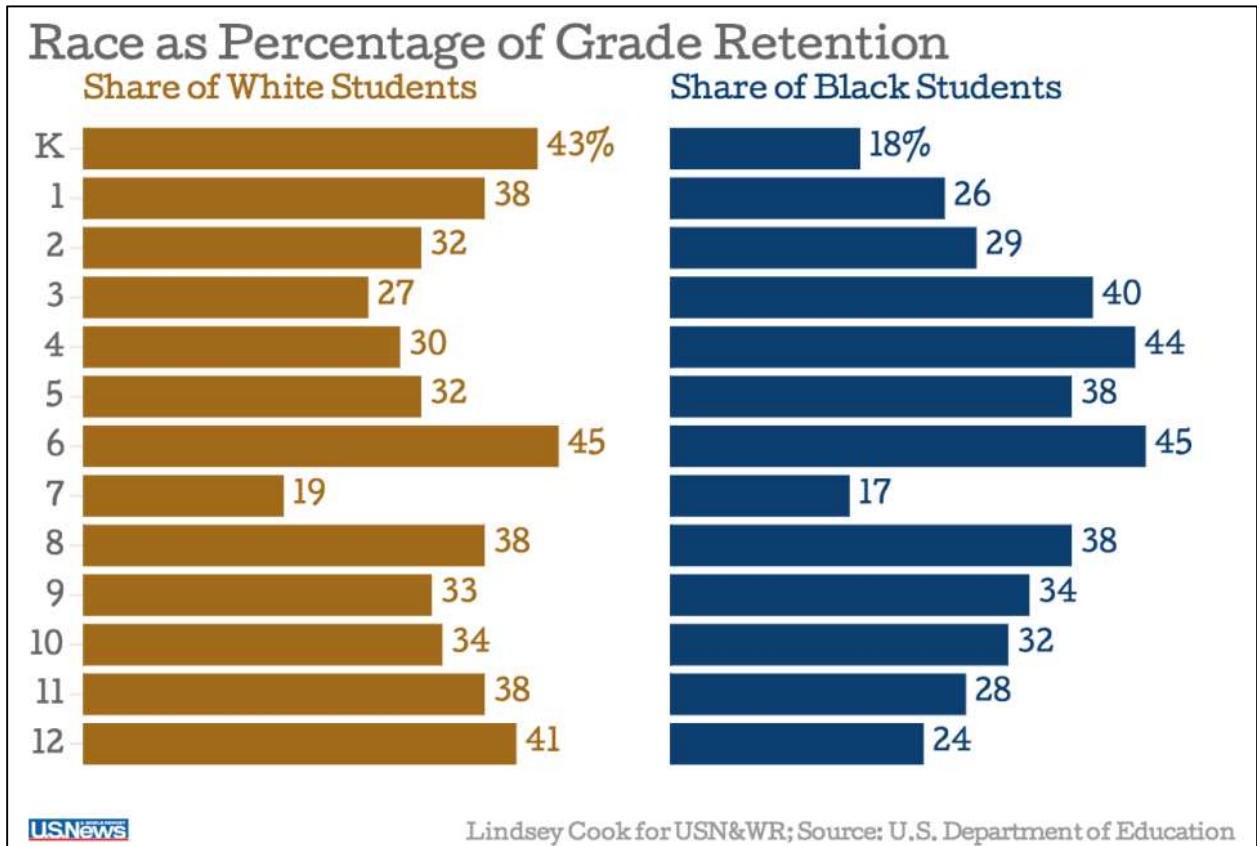


Figure 1: Race as Percentage of Grade Retention

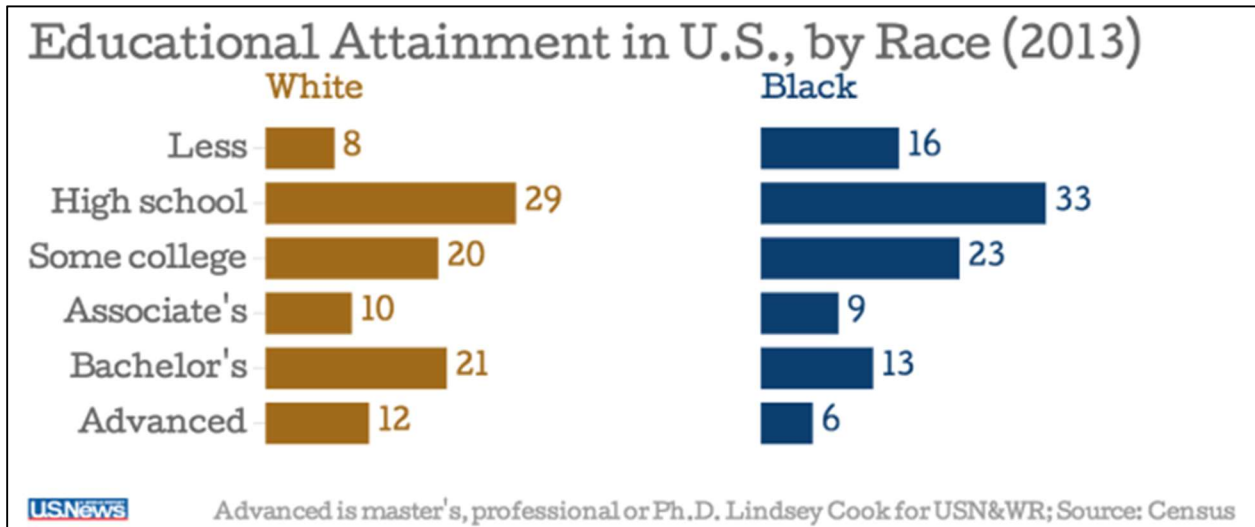


Figure 2: Educational Attainment in U.S., by Race (2013)

The data showing race inequality are available for whoever is interested in analyzing them and making informed decisions on how to decrease numberless deficits in all the institutional sectors in society worldwide. Yet, the number of people willing to fight for better conditions, dignity, and equality is too little to win this battle. According to Gillborn (2010, pg. 3),

in their book, *The Cult of Statistical Significance*, Stephen T. Ziliak and Deirdre N. McCloskey document how tests of statistical significance have become distorted over time in such a way that they have taken on wholly unwarranted influence, often close down debate and suppress vital research findings (Ziliak & McCloskey 2008).

Education is the most important pillar in everyone’s success. No matter race or color, that is what parents try to “implant” in their kids’ brain. However, statistics have shown that having a college degree does not decrease the wealth gap between whites and blacks. “The median wealth

for black households with a college degree equaled about 70 percent of the median wealth for white households without a college degree”. (Hanks, Solomon & Weller, 2018)

It is not necessary to be a mathematician and statistician to interpret the data showing institutional racism in schools. Blacks have been sabotaged for centuries, which makes it hard for a black kid to believe in and hope for changes. Evelyn Hanssen is a white teacher who wrote a reflection paper on institutional racism. After facing colorblind reactions from her colleagues, she decided to reach out to the community to explore and learn more from African American Community leaders. She was shocked when an adjunct graduate, married to a man with a doctorate stated that “her generation had placed their hope in education, but they had found that to be a lie” (Hanssen, 1998). Answers through the perspective of the minority can be shocking, but it should not be surprising based on the history of struggles and failures they have lived. As emphasized by Cook (2015), “many factors contribute to disparities in education. Lower wealth, lower health, lower parental education levels, more dealings with the justice system and other circumstances create a perfect storm that leaves blacks without the same educational opportunities as white”.

Hold on Tight

*“There are two educations. One should teach us how to make a living and the other how to live. “
John Adams*

Auguste Comte, a French philosopher, is the founder of positivism and considered the father of sociology. He defined society as a social organism that has “a harmony of structure and function”. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2008)

“Harmony of structure and function” is a characteristic left behind in our society, especially if we take into consideration the inequalities institutionalized based on races.

Racism has existed for thousands of years. “The earliest forms of racism came from two sources. One is the invaders who entered Black Naga India during the 1700's B.C. that led to extermination and genocide along with religious trickery racism became tied to religions” (Barton, 2003). Racism has been the motive for many wars along the years. Therefore, it is an issue that is far from being resolved. Although the racism towards the black stands out, it is important to have in mind racism towards the Hispanics, Asians, Indian, Muslims etc. “By 2022, the number of Hispanic students in public elementary and secondary schools is projected to grow 33 percent from the 2011 numbers. The number of multi-racial students is expected to grow 44 percent” (Cook, 2015).

We are living in an era in which activists are standing out and fighting for justice. The black is little by little gaining space or positions in the chain of command. The black has been “harvesting” from seeds planted years, centuries ago. The world has become more and more mixed and diverse. Institutional racism has been brought up to everyone’s attention and more and more institutions, especially schools have been trying to understand diversity, to fight racism and provide an equitable education, labeled as “the pillar for a better world” and believed to be “the most powerful weapon”. Hence, raising a flag on institutional racism, especially in schools is a very important action to keep this wave moving forward.

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As pointed out by Came & Humphries (2014), New Zealander activists:

We see the moral integrity of managers as a necessary conduit to institutional and therefore social transformation. We urge their responsible actions in their corporate citizenship in seeking innovations that wipe out institutional(ised) racism and embed practices that are just for all.

Conclusion

*“Simply having discussions isn’t enough.
We also have a responsibility to work toward creating a system that is fair and just.
One that’s built on compassion and love, instead of money and power.”
Rachael DeCruz*

Although I admired Mandela and Martin Luther King before, after this research I truly understand the value and importance of their causes. I realized that, although I am black and have faced racism throughout my whole life, I chose not to really face it in the attempt not to get hurt even more; I numbed myself. However, I am one of the exceptions that have reached a high level in the chain of command in one of the most important sectors: education. Therefore, the least I can do is to honor my martyrs and keep fighting institutional racism. I must be a model and show my students that there is hope. We can never give up a fight!

During this fight, it is important to have in mind that many people are not even aware they are racists. Professor Lambert in Cooperman (2017), reminds us that:

Because we do not realize how much prejudice and stereotyping are going on beneath the level of awareness. It is unconscious, implicit bias. When people talk about

consciousness-raising to become aware of unconscious prejudice, that is an oxymoron, because if it is really unconscious, we are not aware of it. We are not aware of the association our mind is making. But we can be aware of our behavior.

His statement opened my eyes for biases that I might not even realize I have; however, as an educator, I have to watch my behavior and put myself in the position of the other.

I have never had the opportunity to talk through my struggles and perceptions. So, the article that brought the perceptions of the black adolescents spoke deeply to me. On the other hand, the reflection paper written by a white teacher on the colorblindness in her school was an extremely eye opener for me and demotivating. Nevertheless, it made me aware of what I might face within my institution.

I am proud of working for the basic studies department for a college in Washington and I have witnessed institutional racism against us from other departments. First, I thought the role of my department was detrimental to help students adjust and transition. However, Taylor & Clark (2009), have a different opinion about it and I agree with them in some ways:

Placing students in basic skills classes has multiple harmful effects. Not only do content and pedagogical practices in such classes stifle intellectual creativity, but also placement in below level courses reduces the attractiveness of the students as college recruits (Rothstein, 2004), while simultaneously reinforcing race-based assumptions about academic ability.

My comfort is that the staff in my department are highly qualified and we provide a state-of-the-art curriculum that has helped 57% of our students to successfully transition to college and

get better-paid jobs. We have generated millions of dollars to the college and helped it fulfill its missions and a high position in the national ranking.

I was recently invited to be part of a new committee in my college called Faculty and Staff of Color Network and we are in the process of brainstorming ideas. I will bring several ideas on how to investigate our students' and staff' perceptions of racism and institutional racism. "Creating the space to have an honest and genuine dialogue about race is critical". (DeCruz, 2012)

My take away from this investigation is that institutional racism is a fact, a disease whose cure is far from being found. Nesbit's (2015) statement illustrates well how I feel about this subject: "So the next time you see someone questioning whether institutional racism exists in America, there's an obvious answer to the question. We may not like it, but pretending that it doesn't exist isn't right, either."

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