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## The Need to Be Apart In an Inclusive Educational Setting

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## THE NEED TO BE APART IN AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL SETTING

zenaida muslin

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I arrived in Manhattan an experienced educator. Several years as a public school teacher and teacher trainer in Puerto Rico gave me a solid foundation in the field of education. I was confident about teaching in any school, public or independent. My work at an international school in Rome provided a rich ground in which I developed sensitivity about culture and class issues. This awareness was sharpened further during my tenure at an independent American school in Puerto Rico, where I was head of the Spanish department. Living abroad had heightened my appreciation for my Puerto Rican roots. I ached for what has been lost from this culture and feared for what we were still in danger of losing because so many Puerto Ricans so fully embraced American culture.

Two years after I moved to New York City with my family, I began working at an independent school as a Spanish teacher. As years went by, my understanding of the diversity issues at this school grew. I became more involved with those most affected by issues of race and class, the kids of color and their families. We—teachers and administrators—noticed that after a year in the school, the academic work and social behavior of these children suffered.

The majority of the kids of color arrived at this school in the seventh grade. Most of them entered through the efforts of Prep for Prep, an organization that scouts the public school system for academically talented students and gives them a strong academic foundation before placing them in independent schools. Most of these children came from less affluent neighborhoods in the city, and the cultural shock they felt when they came to our school was painful for us to observe. For example, the long list of belongings necessary for the yearly outdoor sleepaway trips, overwhelmed them, especially since they had

little use for these expensive items upon returning to the city. For some, sleeping away from home was something they had never done, even at their relatives' homes. Parents often called to report that their children were sick and could not go on these trips. The school, in turn, assumed these parents did not understand the importance of these trips in the socialization of their children.

At times, kids of color were unprepared to confront their classmates' insensitive remarks regarding race. Moreover, they felt unsupported by their teachers, who ignored racial incidents happening right in front of them. In one eighth-grade classroom, for example, students were talking about the high schools to which they were applying. This conversation naturally led to a discussion about the colleges they hoped to attend. One of the white students remarked to a student of color, "You're going to go to an all black college, aren't you?" The cumulative impact of these comments and other incidents like this seem to have gradually caused the deterioration of the attitude of the kids of color towards their work. In order to protect their self-esteem, fooling around in order to fit in became more important to them than being a responsible student.

I asked the administration for permission to meet alone with the kids of color in order to explore what was troubling them. This launched me into a new position, that of Multicultural Coordinator, and gave birth to the first middle school Kids of Color (KOC) group in a New York City independent school. I held this position for two years, along with my other teaching responsibilities. I also started meeting with these children's parents and helped to organize a Parents of Children of Color (POCOC) group. The kids of color began to feel better about themselves and to take more initiative in the school. In turn, the school seemed to understand their needs more clearly. Then, without warning, everything changed. The school decided to eliminate my Spanish position, and as a result, they eliminated me, the only teacher of color among three other teachers of color who listened to and advised the KOC and their parents.

I review those painful events fifteen years later without truly understanding what happened. It took me several years to believe what my husband immediately identified as racism: racism towards the families of color who were beginning to make their voices heard, and towards me, who helped them to organize. Because I lacked an understanding of the racial differences in this country, I did not recognize that I had knocked on and opened forbidden doors. This was the beginning of my own racial identity development.

Previously, I did not see myself as a black Puerto Rican, nor did I see myself as a white Puerto Rican. I saw myself as a Puerto Rican, and that was it. I was unaware that others saw me differently.

Many persons of color who come to the United States from countries not officially divided racially or religiously have difficulty accepting the term “person of color.” I was no different. As a member of the majority culture in Puerto Rico, my identity and self-esteem were intact. While racial issues exist, they do not define life in Puerto Rico. The ever-present examples of mixed-race families and the equal access to goods, support an identity based on the national culture, not race. My initiative to help families of color, which I presume the school interpreted as political activism, came out of my natural concern for the children with whom I worked every day.

### **Bank Street School for Children**

I arrived at the Bank Street School for Children still sore from my wounds, but ready to move forward as a Spanish teacher. I had no plans to renew my work on diversity. I had no indication that there was a need for such a program.

However, I was in for a surprise. On opening day, at the first faculty meeting, a teacher of color deliberately crossed the room, approached me, and after introducing herself said, “I want you to know that anything you need, I am here to listen.” Instinctively I knew she was not talking about materials. Gradually I became acquainted with the other faculty of color. All of them were student teachers, assistant teachers, and specialists like myself. Although the school had put in place a teaching fellows program with the goal of increasing the pool of qualified teachers of color, there were no head teachers of color.

Even with these good intentions, the staff of color experienced difficulties. They felt a certain lack of professional respect. They wanted their opinions valued at meetings, and their observations, particularly about children of color, listened to. Many came from similar backgrounds as the children. When the school prepared to hold its annual retreat that year, I approached the interim director and proposed that the voices of the teachers of color be integrated into the schedule for that day. The agenda for the retreat was multiculturalism. The response was quick and we were encouraged to meet as a group and organize a presentation.

That retreat gave birth to the Teachers of Color (TOC) group, and the rest is history. While there was no time for an official presentation at the

retreat, the experience of this organizational meeting was so powerful that we kept meeting. Each Friday, without fail, we came together and reviewed the events of the week. There were many tearful and angry sessions, but at the end, we all felt better. With regard to families of color, some of us felt, for example, that the school did not consider our perspectives, often based upon life experience, as a sufficiently professional basis for making educational decisions. Another frequent complaint was the feeling of transparency: white colleagues often ignored our greetings in the halls and at meetings. If we, as professionals of color, experienced difficulties fitting in, we wondered how kids of color and their parents were faring.

It was disturbing, for example, to routinely see teachers holding the hands of children of color while walking in the halls or outside of the school, as if to prevent their misbehavior. Were all these children having difficulty adjusting to a majority white school? Was the school failing to understand that? Why were children of color the first students expected not to behave properly? Or, why did they? I was especially concerned about the way that the poor academic performance of the kids of color was being characterized as a developmental issue. I agree with Jonathan Silin's (1993) critique of the developmentalist perspective. In his opinion, the "exclusive use of psychological theories devalues alternative ways of knowing children—aesthetic, symbolic, imaginative" (Silin, p. 226). The narrow developmental perspective made the parents of the children of color distrustful of the school's philosophy. There were many agitated discussions about this and other topics at the TOC meeting.

The following year we learned, much to our surprise and dismay, that some members of the community considered our meetings exclusionary and racist. In response, the interim director, who happened to be black, respectfully invited us to make a presentation at the monthly faculty meeting in order to clear the air. My first reaction to this invitation was anger. I did not believe we owed anybody an explanation. In the end, however, the TOC group felt we had more to gain than to lose. Here was our opportunity to tell our colleagues about our experiences as persons of color in this school.

The day of the faculty meeting arrived, and the moment was dramatic and unforgettable. As the teachers of color recounted their many painful experiences since coming to Bank Street, emotions in the room ran high. Everyone listened in stunned silence as a particular teacher tearfully recounted her anguish in negotiating, maintaining, and eventually losing, the trust of her family now that she worked for a "white" institution. When her nephew, who

attended a local public school, was struggling with his homework, she enthusiastically offered to help. Her sister, the boy's mother, refused because she didn't trust the "white/progressive" approach this teacher would use. She went on to accuse her of acting "white" ever since she began to study and work at Bank Street.

What were the possible implications of this story for the kids of color at Bank Street? How much were they resisting being "the best that they could be" for fear of becoming "white" back in their neighborhoods among friends and relatives. The fear of acting white among children of color is a well-documented phenomenon, but often it is presented as a high school, rather than an elementary school, phenomenon. While we had prepared for this presentation for weeks, anticipating complicated questions, the actual response surprised us. Our colleagues were speechless, and to this day, more than twelve years later, staff members who were at that meeting have not forgotten its impact. We accomplished our goals beyond expectations. Through our group's testimonies, our colleagues began to understand our experiences. Perhaps they were neither as liberal, nor as accepting of minorities, nor as inclusive as they had once believed. No one questioned our meetings anymore, and community members listened to the voices of TOC with new interest and respect.

The following year the parents of children of color formed their own group, and the same questions about the need to meet separately arose again. The teachers of color had reached out to the parents of children of color. We knew their children. We knew them as parents in the school. We knew their uncertainties, fears and concerns, expressed in confidence in brief encounters and at more formal conferences. They only needed an invitation to come together to share their concerns and to find solutions. With the full support of the new white female director, the parents held what later became known as the famous potluck dinner meeting. In a room full from wall to wall, they gave voice to their unhappiness. Their experiences paralleled our own. They wanted the larger community to give more attention and respect to their opinions. They felt other parents often minimized their concerns, telling them they had misunderstood the situation at hand. They worried about their children's emotional and social wellbeing, as well as their academic progress.

The president of the college came to this meeting. He was clearly impressed with the attendance and the seriousness of the issues raised by Parents of Children of Color. In the end, however, he did not support either this parents group or the school director who organized the meeting. I can only

imagine that he experienced extreme pressure from powerful members of the white parent body, and even some parents of color, who did not understand the need for affinity groups to be apart in order to feel and become integral members of the community.

The repercussions of the Parents of Children of Color's separate meeting at the School for Children were devastating. While some families and staff members spoke out in favor of these meetings, most did not. Many parents and educators alike voiced feelings of anger and hurt. They protested loudly against what they called an exclusionary event. In their opinion, for an inclusive, liberal community to allow a meeting of a separate race-based group was exclusionary and racist. They were partially right. It was exclusionary, but certainly not racist. The need to be apart in order to become integrated was a new concept, which the community continues to struggle to understand and accept.

In response to the meeting, the administration sent out letters of explanation almost every day, hoping to answer questions and clear up misunderstandings. The explanations were never enough. Even today I hear angry voices of protest against that legendary meeting. I still fail to understand why some faculty members, after having gone through the experience of seeing Teachers of Color become a separate group, reacted so strongly against the Parents of Children of Color meeting. In the end, the school director who supported the families and teachers of color was not rehired. She later recounted this episode from her own perspective and gave race-based explanations for the actions of all the actors in the story (Chalmers, 1997). The sad thing about this chapter of our history is that Chalmers was a white woman who truly believed in integration and enabling the voiceless to speak out. She thought that our school, with its long history as a liberal institution, would be fertile ground for this kind of social justice initiative.

The Parents of Children of Color or POCOC, as it was eventually known, has had its ups and downs through the years. While the subsequent administration supported its goals, many in the larger parent community continued to question why this group of parents needed to meet separately. In response to this question, POCOC issued a mission statement to clarify its purpose:

Parents of Children of Color is a coalition of parents at the Bank Street School for Children. The mission of POCOC is to contribute to the positive educational and social experience of children of color at Bank Street. As a group, parents of children of

color seek to identify our common concerns, and share solutions that enable our children and their families to deal more effectively with the diversity issues we face.

POCOC continues to meet and share with the school their observations about how we at the school can best meet their own and their children's needs. The group also suggests ways in which it can contribute to the enhancement of the school's multicultural tapestry.

Several years after the Teachers of Color meetings were launched, I initiated the Open Door TOC meetings. With their non-threatening atmosphere, these meetings have served to develop a new awareness about issues of diversity among the faculty and administration. They also provide an opportunity for white colleagues to develop their own leadership skills as active agents of change. The Open Door TOC meetings are my brainchild, and I am proud of its powerful contributions.

While many teachers of color have come and gone in the school over the past thirteen years, they have all made their mark. They have helped to change the way we view curriculum and kids of color in the classroom. They have changed the way we listen to the parental concerns of children of color. In turn, the experience of being a teacher of color in a mostly white institution has left its mark on them as well.

In 1997, seven years after my arrival at Bank Street School for Children, we founded the Kids of Color group. The Upper School faculty and administration were concerned with this group's social behavior among themselves and in the school corridors and public places. They were playfully calling each other racist names. The results of this first meeting were so positive, that the students requested to continue meeting. By the end of the year, they requested bimonthly sessions in order to develop continuity in their dialogue and to have sufficient time to share their experiences. The Upper School faculty and administration supported this effort, and we all gradually developed a deeper understanding of the emotional and practical needs of children of color in a mostly white institution.

Needless to say, white children also needed to learn why the kids of color wanted time apart. To that end, three years ago, we introduced the first Open Door KOC meetings using the same principles behind the Open Door TOC meetings. The Kids of Color organize the meetings and invite the entire Upper School student body and faculty. They choose the topic, organize the discussion, select leadership responsibilities, and conduct necessary background



research. The topics have included “Stereotyping and Its Effect on Us All,” “The ‘N’ Word in the Media and Entertainment Circles and Who Has the Right to Use It,” and “Affirmative Action, Why Is It Important?” Although attendance is voluntary, a significant number of students come and actively participate. An important goal for the faculty is to help all students to become leaders in the dialogue about diversity at Bank Street and after graduation.

The Teachers of Color group also sees a strong need to educate the larger community about the importance of affinity groups and their contribution to a healthy community. Research demonstrates that children of color are aware of their racial identity early on in their lives (Tatum, 1999). This was confirmed at one of the KOC meetings this year with the topic: “When did you discover that you were a child of color?” Almost all of the twenty children attending answered, between three and four years old. Parents want to instill their children with a sense of pride and knowledge about their ethnic background before they confront life’s realities. Children of color need to see more kids like themselves during the school day. By fostering the KOC group, we are providing an opportunity for those children to learn from each other and to feel each other’s presence.

As children enter preadolescence, racial clustering occurs naturally. Even in the lower grades, small voluntary groups of kids of color are evident throughout the school. Because the majority of the kids of color must leave home communities to attend Bank Street or any other independent school in New York City, their ties to their cultural bases are gradually eroded. Their friends and even relatives may make sarcastic remarks about attending a white school. In the end, they often find themselves to be members of neither community, unless their parents work extraordinarily hard to maintain some home-based connections. By organizing a Kids of Color group, independent schools can provide a structure in which these children can see themselves at least for a few hours a month as members of a majority. Positive racial identity supports healthy self-esteem, which, it is hoped, leads to stronger academic performance.

Bank Street prides itself on inclusiveness, so it is especially difficult for some community members to appreciate the needs of a group that wants and needs to be exclusive. Peggy McIntosh (1989) helps us to understand this phenomenon: She explains how “invisible systems conferring dominance to white people” act as a screen or blindfold against understanding the empowerment enjoyed by those at the receiving end of those systems, including liberal, open-minded people.

Because race relations in this country demand national attention, my work will continue for some time to come. However, I have also started other initiatives. As Diversity Coordinator I have reached out to other affinity groups within the school, including adoptive parents, gay and lesbian families, and alumni of color. Learning from their experience, meeting their needs, and reflecting their presence in the curriculum should contribute to a more inclusive and understanding community. It is my goal to continue working to make the Bank Street School for Children a model of diversity for the independent school community at large. The invaluable support I am now receiving from the administration, faculty, and staff will contribute to my achieving this goal.

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