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Fighting For Justice in Education: How Schools Can Lead the Change Towards a More Equitable World

Tara Kirton

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine the world anew. This one is no different” (Roy, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has had tremendous implications for every aspect of life. School, work, celebrations, and everyday social interactions have all felt the repercussions of the pandemic. While the shutdown called for an immediate pivot from our daily ways of being, it has also offered opportunities for stillness and deep reflection. This moment of pause has provided a chance to think, speak, and *act* differently. As a parent my hope is that educators will lead the change.

FULLER NARRATIVES ARE A MUST

“Mommy, what are all of the people doing in front of the courthouse?” asked my 12-year-old son one morning last summer. “I think they’re holding signs,” said my younger son, while we looked across the street from our apartment. As I prepared to talk to my children about the scene unfolding, with protesters who had gathered to demand justice following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement, I wondered how much they had processed about the racial unrest taking place nationwide. Candid conversations about race and racism were not new in our home. As a Black mother of two tween boys, I began talking about racial identity and topics around social justice with my children from the time that they were in preschool. I realized early on that I needed to instill a strong sense of racial pride to combat the continuous attacks on their humanity encountered on a daily basis through personal interactions and images in the media, and as a result of systemic racism woven throughout society. As I think about the pandemic as a gateway for imagining schools anew, I want schools to leave behind harmful practices that reduce children to stereotypes and embrace the idea of loving Black and Brown children while fully affirming their identities. I highlight the idea of affirming Black and Brown children intentionally because of the way schools have historically harmed them and denied their brilliance.

Roy (2020) compared the lockdown to a chemical experiment in the sense that each one managed to shine a light on hidden things. Illuminated were the incomplete narratives of people of Color and the potential for rethinking curriculum. First-person narratives are one of the core tenets of critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT originated in the legal field, and it seeks to liberate marginalized groups through an examination of how racism functions systemically, rather than through isolated racist acts. It is important for schools and families to consider the historical context in which Black people are often highlighted in school curricula and to examine the partial history it purports.

Narratives regarding enslaved people are incomplete without the inclusion of discussions about chattel slavery and its impact on generations upon generations of Black families. Also often missing from history are the first-person narratives from the enslaved, which can provide meaningful context about the struggles and trauma that they were forced to endure. One cannot understand the stories of Black people and our country without understanding the origins of lynching, Jim Crow laws, white supremacy, and how the failures of the Reconstruction Era continue to impact our present day. Today, we see the effects of redlining and divestment in certain communities, and it is critical for children to understand the linkage from history to the inequities that we see today. It is essential to highlight the fact that Black

people were seen as property from the very beginning of our country's founding and each deemed to be three-fifths of a person. While this may be implied when teaching students about history, it is important to dig deeper to consider what it means to be seen as less than fully human, so we can begin to better understand how ideologies such as those do not disappear; they simply get repackaged. The new forms of slavery include the "cradle to prison pipeline" (Edelman, 2007), and we need to acknowledge that reality if we hope to create change.

All children should be able to see their identity represented from a historical perspective apart from that of struggle and oppression. Children should be provided with experiences that allow them to reach their full potential, guided by teachers who believe in them and are committed to helping them learn. Fuller narratives would allow Indigenous children to see their history apart from the story of Christopher Columbus. Asian students could see themselves as more than the myth of a "model minority," and Latinx students could embrace school experiences that aim to strengthen all of their abilities/capabilities. Black and Brown students deserve to see themselves and their ancestors highlighted in a rich display of greatness in their school curriculum. This should not be an occurrence that takes place occasionally. By providing a more inclusive curriculum, Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color can learn more about the accomplishments of their people and the untold ways they fought against oppression. Many families already provide this sort of education at home, but schools and families can create partnerships where this type of affirmation takes place in both locations. Some schools already implement curricula that affirm the identity of all children through anti-racist teaching or abolitionist teaching. As I imagine schools anew, curricula that affirm marginalized children will be the norm, not the exception.

JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

Schools need to look at their faculty and staff to examine the ways in which they interact with Black and Brown children. The work needs to begin with each of us thinking about our own biases and the intentional misinformation we were taught and are still being taught about people from different racial groups. hooks (1994) talks about the importance of critically reflecting on ourselves and our lives. Are some children praised while others are barely tolerated? Do teachers and administrators engage in or witness racist actions by colleagues and look the other way? Black and Brown children must feel seen, valued, and loved so they can feel safe and successful in school. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz states that educational equity begins with critical love (Resilient Educator Editorial Team, n.d.). She notes that most of our Brown and Black students are constantly given messages through media and elsewhere that they are not deserving of love and opportunities. Children need to know that they have advocates in school who will love them, stand up for them, and nurture all of their gifts.

As a Black parent, I want to see race and the history of racism included in the school curriculum along with math and other subjects. An omission of the full narrative of our history with race and racism is a failure to children everywhere. Ignoring our history does not make it less ugly. Fighting for justice in education means teachers and administrators will see the unique gifts in all children, including their Black and Brown students. According to Love (2020), "Abolitionism is not a social-justice trend. It is a way of life defined by commitment to working toward a humanity where no one is disposable, prisons no longer exist, being Black is not a crime, teachers have high expectations for Black and Brown children, and joy is seen as a foundation of learning" (para. 9). Critical love and a commitment to humanity for all people are key elements as we fight for justice.

Teachers and families need to have ongoing conversations about race and systemic racism, conversations that continue long past this period of social unrest. This is not a moment; it is a movement, and movements require continued support and attention. Baldwin (1962) once said, “nothing can be changed until it is faced” (final para.). I envision the work between schools and families taking place as a partnership throughout the year through workshops on racial identity and on disrupting racist practices. Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum states that it is important for white people and people of Color in a race-conscious society to develop a positive racial/ethnic identity not based on the assumption of a hierarchy of superiority or inferiority (Parents League of New York, 2020). This lifelong process of developing positive identity often requires unlearning internalized misinformation about others and ourselves. Schools can be extremely helpful in supporting this process by providing curriculum that affirms Black and Brown children and helps them develop a strong and positive racial identity. Many schools offer an “All About Me” unit. As I imagine schools anew, I want to see schools include race in those units. A healthy racial identity can help marginalized children develop their self-esteem and provide a counternarrative that can empower them as they encounter racism.

If schools can offer workshops on child development, then schools can offer ongoing opportunities to help families and their faculty engage in conversations around race. In the workshops, families and faculty can work alongside each other to discuss race. Families and teachers can share language and exchange resources that will ultimately benefit the child as the child develops an understanding that it is normal to have questions and make observations about race and identity. Working with a professional who engages in anti-racist work will be important, as people are often fearful of saying the wrong thing when it comes to race. A professional in this field can help everyone navigate challenging moments by helping them to remain engaged and move through discomfort, and also to recognize how dis-ease often silences conversations around race.

In addition, creating a space for continued conversations around race and racism between the faculty and families sends a clear message that schools see the value in designating times for this work to take place. It also moves schools from a place of talking about an issue into a space of *doing* something about it. Many people feel that children are too young to talk about race, when the research proves otherwise. We know that children are constantly trying to make sense of the world, and that includes their efforts to make sense about racial identity. Children are bombarded with silent—and not so silent—messages about race and equity from birth, and they need places to unpack their questions. By equipping families and teachers with language and resources to help children make sense of race and develop an understanding of the history of racism, we are equipping them with tools to challenge racist practices. Finally, we cannot assume that families or schools have the right language to discuss race and racism, as many of us are still in the learning stages ourselves. It would be beneficial for us to do this work together and learn in community.

This is the time to rethink the world that we want to live in and the world that we want to leave behind for our children and their children. We all stand to lose out when false notions of superiority around race are upheld and reified. Bonilla-Silva (2017) reminds us that “change requires taking risks, saying things clearly, and being bold” (p. 253). As I think about my own children and the pivotal time that we all find ourselves in, I look ahead with tremendous hope. All children deserve a safe and equitable learning environment in which they can dream and thrive. Justice in education is within the reach of every teacher and administrator. I urge educators to take the first step in making that possibility a reality.

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