

USC Race and
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RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING ACTS OF EXPLICIT RACISM IN SCHOOLS

By James Bridgeforth, Ph.D.

Racial Equity Guidance for K-12 Teachers



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ABOUT THE SERIES

This practice brief is one of eight in a series of resources published by USC Race and Equity Center for every K-12 school and teacher education program across America. Guidance is offered to educators who are serious about achieving equitable learning conditions and outcomes for students, families, and teachers of color, despite increasing public scrutiny, executive gag orders, and legislative censorship. Each brief introduces research, practical examples, reflective questions, and useful strategies for educators advancing racial equity.

Recognizing and Addressing Acts of Explicit Racism in Schools

In May 2019, Dr. Shaun Harper and I published an opinion essay in Education Week entitled “Why We Weren’t Surprised to See Teachers Holding a Noose.” The incident that sparked this article involved four elementary school teachers from Palmdale, California, whose picture smiling and holding a noose in a classroom had spread throughout local and national news. Our essay explained that while we were undoubtedly disgusted by the image of four teachers holding such a racially violent symbol on school grounds, we were not surprised by this incident.

We were not surprised because of the endemic nature of racism within our society (Bell, 1992; Harris, 1993). We were not surprised because explicit acts of racism such as a teacher conducting Underground Railroad simulations (Schwartz, 2019) or students publicly burning a Black football player from a rival team in effigy (Smith, 2018) are not uncommon across the nation. When these stories surface in the media, they make shockwaves as school districts scramble to proclaim that these incidents do not represent their communities (Bridgeforth, 2021). Years later, I remain unsurprised when such racist incidents occur particularly because, as a broader society, we still struggle to discuss race and racism in schools.

The United States Supreme Court has outlawed the use of race in collegiate admissions (albeit with a confounding exception for America’s military academies). Efforts to ban discussions of race and racism in K-12 classrooms have been repeatedly introduced and enacted at state and local levels across the nation. Former President Donald Trump attempted to marshal the power of the federal government to ban the use of *The New York Times* 1619 Project in America’s schools. Yet even prior to these actions, we knew that many in our K-12 teaching force were wary of talking about race and racism and chose to ignore or minimize how race shapes experiences and outcomes in our society (Aronson et al., 2020; Modica, 2015; Segal & Garrett, 2013).

Given this reality, it is abundantly clear that the ability to recognize and address explicit acts of racism in schools is a skillset that must be addressed throughout the educator preparation pipeline. This brief offers educators several recommendations and strategies that can be used to better prepare educators to not only understand the depths of racism within our society, but importantly to use that knowledge to directly counter acts of racism that occur in their schools.

The Importance of Developing Racial Literacy



Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (2011) defines racial literacy as “a skill and practice in which students probe the existence of racism, and examine the effects of race and other social constructs and institutionalized systems which affect their lived experiences and representation in U.S. society” (p. 25). In describing this concept, Sealey-Ruiz explains that college students who obtain racial literacy are able to deeply engage in discussions about race and racism that are not only theoretical, but also provide opportunities to work toward constructing new realities.

Other scholars describe racial literacy development as emotional and ethical by nature, directly impacting the ways that students may have previously viewed themselves, their understandings of whiteness as a construct, and its implications for racial equity within the broader society (Brunsmas et al., 2013; Winans, 2010). These insights offer a critical foundation for identifying entry points in the process of better preparing educators to respond to racism within their schools.

Addressing acts of explicit racism in schools requires educators to be able to understand the ways in which racism continues to impact our broader society and the ability to identify opportunities to disrupt said impact within their locus of control. For example, racial literacy development can provide educators with the skills to critically analyze curricula and learning materials to identify historical inaccuracies or racially insensitive content. Similarly, educators who maintain ongoing racial literacy development practices may be well suited to recognize racial tensions occurring within their classrooms and mitigate potential opportunities for racial conflicts.

Questions for Consideration

1

Where do opportunities currently exist for educators within your context to develop their racial literacy skill sets?

- a. If opportunities exist, are these opportunities ongoing communities of practice or one-time professional learning experiences? Consider how the structure of these spaces may influence the depths to which educators can develop racial literacy skills and practices.
- b. If none currently exist, how might you cultivate such opportunities for educators?

2

Educators of color are often charged with engaging teacher candidates in discussions about race and racism (Evans-Winters & Twyman Hoff, 2011). Does this framing ring true within your context? If so, consider how this practice may contribute to racial battle fatigue, defined by Smith et al. (2011) as “emotional, psychological, and physiological distress” that people of color experience as a result of persistent racial microaggressions and racialized labor” (p. 64). You might also reflect on how all educators within your context, particularly White educators, may expand their racial literacy development to lessen racialized burdens of leading conversations around race and racism.

Prioritizing Development over Defensiveness

In a 2021 analysis of educational leaders' public responses to racial violence in schools, I identified common strategies and discourses that educators used when tasked with responding to explicit acts of racism (Bridgforth, 2021). Examples of the incidents included in this sample were racial slurs, racist social media posts, racist signs and graffiti in schools, and instances of blackface. Through press releases, letters, and other public statements, leaders regularly employed language that indicated shock and disdain for these racist actions. They explained that these incidents were not representative of their schools and districts. Leaders affirmed that there was "no place for hate" within their communities and that diversity, equity, and inclusion would remain guiding values for their schools.

While some educators undoubtedly believed that they were meaningfully addressing the acts of racism that had negatively impacted their school communities, many of these responses also demonstrated a willingness to engage in what Hardie and Tyson (2013)



describe as institutional boundary making. This phenomenon can be understood as a defensive strategy designed to draw boundaries around the school or the perpetrator of racial violence, insulating the school from negative associations with the racist actions. In doing so, educators prioritize defensiveness and the reputation of the school rather than understanding these incidents as an opportunity to lean into developing more racially just and equitable environments.

Schools are microcosms of our broader society (Bidwell, 2001; Coburn, 2004), thus they will understandably be influenced by racism and White supremacy. Educators should recognize this reality and prioritize opportunities to disrupt racism rather than defend their schools from potentially being identified as racist.

Questions for Consideration

1

Critically reflect on prior acts of explicit racism that have either occurred within your school context or that you have been made aware of in other contexts. When you learned of the incident, what was your initial reaction? Were you shocked? Angered? Saddened? Hold onto that emotion and reflect on why that emotion may have arisen first.

2

Consider who has been impacted by the racist act. Were they students of color? Families? Fellow educators? Use this reflective opportunity to consider what actions you might take to support those that have been most greatly impacted. Responses to racial violence should prioritize an ethic of care and center those that have been harmed or are most at risk of being harmed. Listen to their needs, thoughts, and proposed solutions and actively work to center those priorities in your response(s).

Identifying Racial Learning Opportunities

In the introduction to this brief, one of the examples of explicit acts of racism that I provided involved high school students burning an effigy of a Black football quarterback in east Texas prior to a football game with a rival team. When images of the largely White crowd of community members chanting “Light him up!” and burning the mannequin spread throughout media reports, school district leaders responded by claiming that the incident was a misunderstanding, defending what they described as a storied tradition within their community that was not racist by any means. They explained that the tradition occurred regardless of the race of the rival team’s quarterback. In sum, leaders defended the right to continue the practice despite critiques of racism from community members.

As previously stated, racism deeply influences countless norms, policies, practices, and routines within our society (Bell, 1992). Even if we are to believe that this incident did not involve any racial animus or racist intent on behalf of the school district or the community members who engaged in this practice, it is

important to consider why some members of the community may have identified this as a racist act.

Instead of dismissing community opposition to the tradition, one strategy that educators can use to address explicit acts of racism in schools is to leverage these incidents as opportunities for racial learning. To be clear, I do not mean that educators should engage in learning practices that retraumatize students or community members, particularly students and community members of color who may have been harmed by the act. However, responses to these actions can center collective learning about race and racism through critical, reflective dialogues about race or community-centered, place-based explorations of the continued impact of race and racism within their schools.

For example, in the wake of this particular racial incident, educators could have engaged students in an inquiry-based learning experience that explored the history of lynching in America and the ways that racial violence has directly impacted their community. Collaborations with local historians may have explained that within this particular geographic region, there is an extensive history of lynchings that occurred in the decades immediately preceding the start of the district’s storied tradition.

Questions for Consideration

1

As an educator, consider how explicit acts of racism can serve as catalysts for community-centered racial learning.

- a. What kind of dialogue(s) may be necessary to help build collective understanding of acts of racism in schools?
- b. Who might be best suited to facilitate these learning experiences? Do you need external expertise to help build your capacity to lead these experiences?

Leading Constructive Conversations about Race and Racism



Much of the work in responding to explicit acts of racism in schools should involve intentional conversations among educational partners designed to meaningfully address racism through new strategies, policies, practices, etc. However, we know that “teachers – especially white teachers – tend to avoid discussing race and, in the rare occasions they do, minimize its importance and relevance in education” (Segall & Garrett, 2013, p. 265). When acts of explicit racism occur within schools, it is critical that educators avoid such race-evasive practices—instead, leaning into discussions that can broaden understandings of race and racism within their school communities. This means that those charged with preparing educators to serve in our schools must consistently facilitate opportunities for educators to practice engaging in and leading constructive conversations about race and racism.

Decades of scholarship explains that these conversations can be difficult and often result in educators expressing racially

insensitive statements and continuing racial microaggressions (Kohli, 2008; Vaught and Castagno, 2008). However, Myers and Finnigan (2018) offer an important suggestion for beginning these conversations: using data as a starting point. They explain that grounding conversations about race and racism in data can help school staff see that current problems occur at a systemic level and produce clearly visible inequitable results, making it harder for individuals to insist that there is no problem because they are “not racist” (p. 39).

Educators seeking to engage their school communities in the aftermath of an act of explicit racism should learn from this insight and use relevant data to guide conversations aimed at fostering racial learnings.

Questions for Consideration

1

As you plan for constructive conversations about race and racism, how can you work to promote psychological safety? Consider your audience. Who will be in the room? What are their salient identities and backgrounds? What might participants need in order to feel safe enough to learn and challenge normative assumptions and beliefs within the space?

2

Consider co-developing discussion norms that can guide your initial conversations, particularly as these conversations may bring up a range of emotions, values, and beliefs. How can your norms foster radical honesty?

3

Recognize that addressing explicit acts of racism will be a process and may involve a series of smaller conversations rather than one large discussion similar to a town hall. What structures might you need to put in place to maintain the learnings that are raised in each session? How might you provide continued learning opportunities for those tasked with leading the conversations to ensure that they remain prepared to facilitate this process?

Looking Ahead

While certainly not exhaustive, the strategies, recommendations, and questions offered in this practice brief may provide educators with some direction when faced with responding to explicit acts of racism in their schools. Lessons included in this brief can help educators become better prepared to protect the physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being of students and families of color within their schools by meaningfully engaging in anti-racist approaches to responding to racism in all its forms.

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ABOUT THE USC RACE AND EQUITY CENTER

The University of Southern California is home to a dynamic research and organizational improvement center that helps professionals in educational institutions, corporations, and other contexts strategically develop and achieve equity goals, better understand and correct climate problems, avoid and recover from racial crises, and engineer sustainable cultures of inclusion and respect. Evidence, as well as scalable and adaptable models of success, inform our rigorous approach. Grants from the Ford, Lumina, Bill and Melinda Gates, W.K. Kellogg, Kresge, and Open Society Foundations have funded the Center's research and partnerships.

The Center is home to the USC Equity Leadership Academies (a professional learning and organizational change series for K-12 schools and districts), USC Equity Institutes (a professional learning and organizational change series for higher education institutions), the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates (a quantitative survey), PRISM (a racial equity employee recruitment tech tool for higher education), and the Alliance for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Business.