

African-American Experiences in the Workplace: Miseducation Goes a Long Way

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to learn how Blacks believe race affects their workplace interactions with Whites and why. The most compelling finding of the study: participants believed mis-education influenced workplace interactions. The implications of the study: how the relationship between racism, racial identity and education affects workplace interactions.

Theoretical Framework

Racial identity may be defined as a "sense of group or collective identity, based on one's *perception*, that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (Helms, 1990, p. 1). The various models on black and white racial identity explore the psychology or development process (stages) by which a person develops his/her racial identity (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990; Jackson, 2001). Research suggests the development of one's racial identity begins as early as childhood years. According to Tatum (1997), children as young as three years of age recognize racial differences such as skin color, hair texture and facial features. In recognizing these differences, children begin to raise questions about their own racial identity, as well as the racial identity of others. It is when children enter adolescence, however, that they begin to grapple with serious questions regarding racial identity. Black adolescents, in particular, must think about themselves in terms of race because it is how the rest of the world views them (Tatum, 1997). As Black and White children struggle through the maze of racial identity, education and teachers play an integral role in shaping that identity, as well as formulating opinions and perceptions of people of different color.

The effects of education on racial identity development are evident in students' reaction to what they learn, educationally and socially, in the public school system. For example, schools have established a system whereby students' achievement is measured based on standardized tests, which may be racially and culturally biased, as opposed to individual student performance. Further, many students in the United States still attend segregated schools where the curriculum centers on the achievements of Whites and Europeans, while seldom depicting Blacks in favorable ways. The result is that students are socialized to believe that there is a white and right standard to be attained. "Schooling [therefore] seeks to teach African-American children their lack of importance in the educational and social worlds" and students respond to this by "seeking to reaffirm their identities as competent and worthwhile persons . . ." (Beckman, 1995, p. 126).

Teachers can significantly influence student racial identity development through their classroom practices, such as their attitude towards diversity and the curriculum they emphasize (Branch, 1999). A very common example of this occurs during Black History Month. Teachers utilize Black History Month as a means to highlight the contributions and accomplishments of prominent Blacks, such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr. However, such key figures are only studied during the month of February. This devalues the contributions of Blacks to American history by separating Black history from White history. Such classroom practices "are standards for children, implicitly and explicitly" (Branch, 1999, p. 23).

The aforementioned examples demonstrate how education and teachers affect racial identity development at an early age and through adolescence. Research on the effects of education on *adult racial identity* development has been limited. However, in his theory of black racial identity development, Cross (1991), explores how education affects adult perspectives and experiences. Cross' model is based on Nigrescence, a French term, which means *to become black*. The model explains the psychology or development process by which Black adults are transformed, by life experiences, into persons who become Black or develop a Black racial identity. The first stage of the model, the Pre-encounter stage, explores some of the adult characteristics that must be changed if the adult is to develop a positive racial identity. These undesirable characteristics are a result of the mis-education Blacks receive during their years of schooling. According to Cross, students have been mis-educated because they have been formally educated in a system that is White and Western dominated. The result is that Blacks are indoctrinated to "embrace a Western cultural-historical perspective" (Cross, 1991, p. 192). In fact, Cross maintains that it is very difficult for *any* Black student in America to receive their compulsory education without being mis-educated about the role of Africa in Western civilization and the role of Blacks in American history. Cross notes,

Extreme mis-education can result in a great deal of skepticism about the abilities and capabilities of Black leaders, Black businesses, and Black professionals, and an equal degree of romanticism and near mysticism concerning the capabilities and talents of whites. That is, if Blacks are taught to be intellectually inferior and technologically backward, whites are seen as intellectually superior and technically advanced (p. 193).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to learn *how* Blacks believe race has affected their workplace interactions with Whites and the reasons *why*. The second part of the question, which addresses *why* Blacks believe race is an influential factor affecting workplace interactions, was an open-ended question. In other words, participants were not asked if they believed, for example, that education specifically played a role in shaping those interactions. However, education emerged as a dominant factor. Much in the same manner that Cross describes how mis-education affects adult perspectives and experiences, the participants in this study believed their compulsory education was partly responsible for how Blacks and Whites interact in the workplace.

Method

The study was a qualitative mini-project, undertaken during a course semester. The participants consisted of three African-American public administrators employed with a local municipality, the City of Southwest, Florida (pseudonym). The City of Southwest is the fourth largest city in its respective county, consisting of a population of approximately 60,000. The most dynamic component of the City's population growth has been the steady "in-migration" of Blacks, Hispanics and other minority groups. Blacks of many derivations made up 3.7% of the population in 1980; 31.9% of the population in 1990; and 53% of the population in 2000. Notwithstanding the minority population growth, the City had not been as expeditious in its efforts to diversify its personnel. However, within the last four years, the City has made major gains by hiring Blacks for key administrative positions, which were traditionally held by Whites.

Administrators, as opposed to lower-level employees, were selected for the study because they are more likely to have broad interaction with persons outside of the organizational structure, such as residents and elected officials. The three administrators held the positions of Deputy City Manager, Director of Community Planning/Development, Assistant Director of Community Planning/Development, and had 17, 12 and 5 years administrative experience, respectively. All of their experience was in the field of public administration, at the local and/or federal level. Participants requested confidentiality and anonymity; consequently, their names and the names of their organizations, past and present, were concealed. Participants were interviewed separately for approximately one hour and a half each, and were asked several questions regarding their past and present workplace interactions with Whites. This included interactions with White superiors, subordinates, counterparts, elected officials, and residents. The questions addressed how participants believe race influenced their workplace interactions (specific examples of incidents) and the reasons why (contributing factors).

Findings

Participants cited various examples of incidents which demonstrated how they believed race has and continues to affect their workplace interactions with Whites. The examples were first-hand accounts of covert and overt forms of discriminatory experiences and were told from the participants' perspective. In one account, a city was under a Federal Court Order and was mandated to hire more Blacks and Hispanics in its police and fire departments. The participant was recently hired as the Personnel Analyst, responsible for minority recruitment, retention and promotion. Shortly after being hired, her boss called her into his office in order to make clear his position regarding the Court Order. She explained:

Within the first few weeks of starting the position, I was called into the Personnel Director's office and he had a picture of Abraham Lincoln on his wall. He looked at me and he said, do you know who this person is? I said, yes, it's Abraham Lincoln. He said, yes, he is the one who started it all. And I looked at him and I said what do you mean? And he basically said look, on a personal level, I don't care anything about Affirmative Action, diversity, minorities, females, and all that kinda stuff, but, the Federal Government tells me that I have to . . . and he said your job is to make me look good, and I need you to do whatever it is you need to do that is necessary to bring more minorities and females into the police and fire departments. Whether or not I care about the issue is another story.

Another participant discussed an incident in which an elected official refused to work with her because he believed a Black employee could not cater to his White, affluent constituents. Although the participant was the Assistant to the Commissioner, he gave all of her assignments to the White secretary, a lower-level support staff employee. When asked how could she be certain that race was a factor, she responded that the secretary indirectly acknowledged the fact (by consistently apologizing for the Commissioner's behavior) and the City Manager directly acknowledged the fact (by asking what could be done to remedy the problem). According to the participant, the Commissioner,

. . . really deep down inside felt because she [the secretary] was White he could trust her more and she could relate to his constituents better than I because of my race. He

never said it, but all of the evidence was there and the City Manager said what can we do . . . we had other Commissioners who lived in affluent areas and they had no problem with me, but he just really would not deal with me.

After discussing how they believed race affected their workplace interactions with Whites, participants openly discussed the contributing factors. All participants believed many of their experiences were a result of institutionalized practices. For example, upon being hired as the Personnel Analyst with the city that was under a Court Order, the participant discovered there were many artificial barriers, which prevented Blacks from attaining jobs, such as biased testing instruments and all White interview panels. Two of the participants believed the media played a role in how Whites perceive and interact with Blacks in the workplace. In particular, the media depicts Blacks in unfavorable, stereotypical roles and because some Whites have little, if any, interaction with Blacks outside of work, Whites begin to draw conclusions about Blacks based on what they see on television.

The most compelling finding of the study was that all participants believed Whites' compulsory education was a major factor influencing cross-racial workplace interactions. One participant explained, "When they [Whites] go to school they don't really learn about Black people except for about Dr. King. So, I think it has to do with their culture and the way they are educated." Another participant clearly articulated much of the same sentiments regarding mis-education that Cross discussed in his theory of black racial identity development. The participant believed mis-education was the very starting point at which Blacks and Whites are educated and socialized to believe that the role of Blacks in civilization and American history is insignificant. He also believed, as a result of this mis-education, Whites develop a sense of superiority. More importantly and more relevant to this study, the participant believed mis-education ultimately affects the way Blacks and Whites interact in the workplace. He explains,

First of all, from our compulsory education . . . we don't focus enough on the contributions of African-Americans within this society. African-Americans have made some very positive contributions to the socio-economic progress of this country. You can go back to African-American inventors who had a very positive impact on the American economy . . . but, it's been slow to recognize those contributions, and I think that a lot of Whites, for example, grow up very ignorant of the contributions of African-Americans, and it looks as if, they don't see other cultures as having made positive contributions. I think even outside of just American history, I think when you look at world history we typically start with contributions of Greeks. We don't go back and look at Africa and look at some of the civilizations that were there and the advancement of African people . . . but, I think Europeans don't grow up learning this, they grow up learning that Greece spread everything . . . and it gives them a sense of superiority . . . and I think in general, people come out of that educational system and they begin to go into their workplace . . . so, they question our authority, our ability to do anything.

Conclusion

Implications for the Field of Education

The purpose of this study was to learn *how* Blacks believe race has affected their workplace interactions with Whites and the reasons *why*. The most compelling finding of the study was that

participants believed mis-education influenced their workplace interactions with Whites. Although the study was limited in scope, the findings suggest there is a relationship between mis-education and cross-racial workplace interactions. The implications of this study center on two relationships, which are expressed throughout the theoretical framework: (a) how the relationship between *education and racism* affects black/white workplace interactions; and (b) how the relationship between *education and racial identity* affects black/white workplace interactions.

The first relationship, which addresses the link between education and racism, specifically focuses on multicultural education. In order to understand how the two are intertwined, one must understand the original purpose and intent of multicultural education. Multicultural education, formerly known as multiethnic education, originated with the civil rights and protests movements of the 1960s. The purpose and intent of multicultural education was consistent with the goals of the civil rights movement: social change, removing institutional barriers and ensuring inclusiveness. Hence, advocates of multicultural education sought to do more than create a multicultural "program" within the school system. Instead, they focused on more substantial reform, which addressed educational deficiencies as well as societal inequities. According to McIntyre (1997),

Multiethnic education was seen as a beacon for those who wanted to cross the educational borders and challenge existing forms of institutional and cultural racism. Thus, their challenges to the educational system were also seen as challenges to the existing ownership of knowledge and to the larger issues of the distribution of power and wealth in our society (pp. 9-10).

Because racism and racial oppression were central to the founding of multicultural education, one cannot understand the rationale or the need for multicultural education without addressing racism (Nieto, 1996; Sleeter, 1999). Multicultural education does not necessarily or automatically do away with racism (Nieto, 1996). However, if schooling, through multicultural education, can address such issues as institutional and cultural racism, it may change the way Black and White students perceive and interact with one another. Furthermore, as students become adults and go into their workplaces, it may change the way they interact.

The second implication of this study involves how the relationship between *education and racial identity* affects black/white workplace interactions. As previously noted, teachers can significantly influence student racial identity development through their classroom practices. Teachers' classroom practices, however, are a result of their personal beliefs and ideologies and their own racial identity development. Moreover, it is important to note that teachers have also been educated in a school system that is historically exclusionary and biased. For these reasons, some educators agree teachers should conduct a self-evaluation of their own racial identity and their attitudes towards race and diversity (Hollins, 1999; Sleeter, 1997). This will enable them to address and overcome their own personal biases which they may bring to the classroom. Some white educators believe this self-evaluation is even more imperative for white teachers because it will enable them to think more critically about "multicultural education as antiracist education." McIntyre (1997) states, ". . . we, as white educators, need to examine our racial identity in hopes that such an examination will contribute to new ways of teaching and learning that disrupt racist educational practices" (p. 14). If, through self-evaluation, teachers can promote a healthy racial identity for themselves and their students, they can set new standards in the classroom. Such

standards will guide students through adulthood and also as they begin to interact with Whites in the workplace.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study was a mini-project undertaken during a course semester. As a result, the study was limited in scope, specifically, in terms of the number of participants and the time allowed for completion. There are three suggestions for further research. First, the study should be broadened to include more participants. Although three participants may be representative of an organization, it certainly is not representative of a population. Second, given the implications between education and cross-racial workplace interactions, more specific questions regarding how participants interpret the long-lasting affects of their education should be asked. Third and in conclusion, although there is research linking racism and racial identity to education, there is little research which addresses what happens after Black and White students are educated, become adults and move into the workplace. How does mis-education affect these cross-racial workplace interactions? A more in-depth study may be instrumental in answering this question.

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