St. Louis program battles racism by targeting educators’ self-awareness and behavior that can limit students’ potential to achieve

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The comic strip character Pogo is famous for having triumphantly announced, “We have met the enemy, and he is us!” Pogo’s insight holds many implications for education, not the least of which is connected to professional behaviors that influence the racial achievement gap in schools.

Over the past five years, education leaders in St. Louis have participated in a guided six-day retreat experience that helps them examine their values and behavior in light of “white privilege” and “internalized oppression.” The learning experience challenges participants’ self-perceptions as educators — and as people — and provides them with a compelling impetus for change.

A study by the Center for Organizational Leadership and Renewal at Saint Louis University on the impact this learning has had on participants’ schools and districts found that the experience led to real changes in professional and institutional behavior.

THE PROBLEM IN CONTEXT

In recent years, school professionals have sought to address the racial achievement gap through professional development programs that focus on developing greater understanding of people of racial and ethnic backgrounds other than our own, creating a greater multicultural presence in school learning materials, and/or enhancing the dialogue between whites and people of color.

Each strategy likely has helped reduce the harmful effects of racism on children’s education. However, given the insidious ways in which racism can undermine even the best-intentioned reform efforts, these approaches often are unequal to the task of dismantling long-held atti-
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**THE DRIE PROCESS**

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In the retreat, facilitators first spend time creating a “safe space” where people can get to know each other as colleagues. They use the “listening pair” method (listening non-critically and without interrupting) to facilitate sharing and help participants open up to one another about their professional and personal experiences.

The program proceeds with the introduction of two phenomena underlying the practice of discrimination. The first is the “cycle of socialization,” how our own belief systems are formed. The facilitators lead a discussion of the cycle incorporating specific vignettes that illustrate the history of discrimination in our culture. The second phenomenon, the “fabric of oppression,” explores ways in which oppression is woven into American society and distinguishes between privileged groups and targeted groups. During this conversation, participants explore their membership in such groups and share their perceptions and feelings. Participants also are invited to draw connections to behavior in schools and discuss how the fabric of oppression manifests itself in relationships and behaviors in and out of the classroom.

Probably the most emotionally charged portion of the DRIE occurs in an exercise that builds on the discussion of privilege and oppression. The exercise is designed to explode the myth of the level playing field in the American workplace, and in schools in particular. Participants join hands and stand in a line, usually outside on a hill or an incline. Facilitators pose a battery of 45 questions that reveal issues of class, race, and gender discrimination. For example, one question asks, “Have you ever been denied a mortgage because your neighborhood was redlined?” Another is, “Have you ever been promoted because you knew the boss as a personal friend?” When a participant’s response indicates benefit of privilege, he or she takes a step forward. When a response illustrates having been targeted for discrimination, he or she takes one step backward. So, while everyone started out together, holding hands in a line, they soon “lose their grip” on one another, and the line begins to separate in some telling ways.

The experience invariably marks participants as having decidedly different histories as students, as professionals, and as people. At the end of the exercise, players may have considerable distance between them. Whites often are near the top of the hill, and people of color are farther down at the bottom. This dramatic positioning exercise strikes home for most participants. Beliefs such as “I got to where I am today mainly through hard work” are challenged, as are assumptions of how much we know of each other’s backgrounds as educators.

In a follow-up exercise, participants pose questions from the perspective of color or gender and address a specific group with the question. The discussion provides an additional opportunity to look at connections and disconnections, and reveals how racism and other forms of discrimination have hurt us all.

Discussion occurs both as a large group, and in race-specific small groups. Participants are challenged to look at how white privilege and internalized oppression are manifest both in their lives and in their institutions. These conversations are not meant to generate guilt or hostility.
They aim to bring to light the existence of discrimination in places where we tend to deny its occurrence. They are a powerful goal to developing greater self-awareness in an area we may ignore, deny, or rationalize. As White and Cones (1999) argue:

“To reach across the perceptual divide and achieve the level of mutual understanding and empathic awareness that is essential for productive dialogue, each side will have to confront and express intense, and sometimes painful, emotions. … The two most difficult problems for whites will be developing empathy for the black experience in America and acknowledging that white skin carries with it certain advantages from birth.”

Discussions in the last days of the institute focus more on facing the existence of discrimination and looking for ways to liberate ourselves and our schools, such as working to change the language we use. Some of these conversations occur in job-specific small groups, and listening pairs are used again to invite fresh thinking about change.

On the final day, facilitators lead participants through a “re-entry process,” helping them prepare to take their learning — and their feelings — back to their districts and schools. Participants are encouraged to reflect on the week through journaling as a way to sharpen their thoughts and to make them more actionable. School district teams discuss the task of dismantling racism by targeting what they might want to start, stop, or continue.

Facilitators offer all participants resources for follow-up, including other programs, e-mail lists of past participants, and reunion dates.

LOOKING FOR OUTCOMES

Post-session evaluations gave the DRIE high marks. Participants often refer to the experience as the beginning of an important professional (and personal) journey. Most significantly, this experience has had behavioral consequences.

In 2005, NCCJ and a university-based research organization called RegionWise commissioned the Center for Organizational Leadership and Renewal at Saint Louis University to conduct an impact assessment of the DRIE. The study sought to answer the question, “What behaviors — individual and institutional — might actually have changed after DRIE participants went back to their districts and schools?” The study focused on four suburban school districts that each had sponsored at least 10 participants over several years of DRIE. The study asked participants about three dimensions of potential change:

- How educational leaders perceive their roles and role priorities;
- How conversations about racism and school performance take place; and
- School and district policies and practices.

While student outcome data (including standardized test scores, dropout rates, and graduation rates) will be examined in future years, it was decided that most DRIE participants had not yet been back in schools for a sufficient period to affect such change.

Twenty-seven educational leaders were interviewed (13 district-level administrators or board members and 14 building-level administrators). Some had participated in the DRIE the previous summer. Others were alumni from earlier retreats.

IMPACT ON ROLE PERCEPTIONS AND PRIORITIES

Practically all interviewees attested to changes in how they see themselves and their mission as school professionals (or as board members). Most significantly, their descriptions of these changes included ways they act differently:

- Whites said they spend more time and effort getting to know black students (and their parents) as individuals rather than stereotypes.
- Participants reported greater willingness to talk with colleagues, of the same and/or other races, about racism.
- Participants felt more motivated to advocate dismantling racism as a professional priority.
- Participants said they were less inclined to “blame the victim,” to see failed achievement as inevitable.
- Participants of color reported more attention to the damage of put-downs between students of color.

IMPACT ON INVOLVING OTHERS IN CLOSING THE GAP

As a result of seeing their own role differently, participants said they were more inclined to be aware of and take action against injustice and oppression. Respondents said they successfully engaged others in productive conversations about students and about school culture:

- Participants’ conversations with administrator colleagues and board members more frequently involved using racially disaggregated data, and the conversation was more likely to lead to changes in policy or establishing new practices.
- Participants’ conversations with teachers and school staff now extend regularly to staff meetings, faculty workshops, ad hoc committees, and performance reviews.
- Participants’ conversations with parents and other community members take place with greater candor, uses data more regularly, and occurs more frequently off-campus.

School district teams discuss the task of dismantling racism by targeting what they might want to start, stop, or continue.
IMPACT ON POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Each district can point to several strategies instituted to close the racial achievement gap and lessen racial discrimination in the schools as a result of the retreat. While the experience may not have been the sole cause of the change, participants attributed many new policies and practices at least in part to their DRIE experience and to the fact that several colleagues had shared that experience. These new initiatives affected:

• **Personnel practices**: hiring, promotion and performance evaluation.
• **Strategic plans and School Improvement Plans (SIPs)**: use of disaggregated data and input from diversity committees (including parents).
• **Special programs for black students (and their parents/caregivers)**, including efforts to:
  - Increase advanced course enrollment;
  - Provide supplemental academic coaching and support; and
  - Provide adult and peer counseling on negotiating school transitions and career planning.
• **School climate and behavior management**: changes in student discipline policy, behavior guidelines, and tone and inclusiveness of school communications.
• **Staff development**: locally designed and administered workshops derived from DRIE, or others meant to support specific objectives around closing the achievement gap or creating equitable student discipline.
• **Curriculum and instruction**: focus on differentiated instruction, multicultural texts, curriculum plans that show intentional and purposeful diversity, and culturally competent teaching.

When teachers and administrators expect less of black students or employ a double standard in disciplining whites and blacks, they are behaving in ways that are educationally detrimental to students of color and socially detrimental to all students. These attitudes, behaviors, and institutional practices can seriously undermine well-planned efforts to improve school performance for children of color.

Dialogue about race and the effects of covert and overt racism rarely occur casually. A facilitated dialogue that leads to developing an awareness of others and to confronting our own behavior can be a powerful force for change and a step toward finally understanding — and possibly addressing — the achievement gap.

REFERENCE


Indeed, the Jonsson Community School Red Folder process may be an example of one of the most intimately job-embedded strategies — springing from a foundation of dialogue, collaboration, sharing, and action — a deceptively simple tool focused on the teacher as learner in order to benefit each student.

REFERENCES

