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Stay calm and detached, but be clear in response to racist remarks

By Laura Ihonvbere

THE FIRST TIME an educator speaks out against a racist remark in the school setting is often the most difficult, particularly when the comment is made by an adult the educator does not know. When the remark surfaces, it often takes a few seconds to recover from the shock of hearing such a disturbing comment in a place regarded as safe and supportive of children. In these long, agonizing seconds, the educator contemplates whether to speak out or let the comment pass. Speaking out might result in an ugly backlash, but silence condones the remark. If no one else heard the comment, it would be easy to ignore.

But would it? Without a culturally proficient lens, this might be true. In fact, the educator without a culturally proficient lens might not give the comment a second thought. But a culturally proficient educator faces a moral dilemma — do what's right or do what's easy? In other words, can the educator overcome apprehension of confrontation and respond to this racist remark? Realizing her failure to act may haunt her conscience for a long time to come, the educator transcends her fear and decides to speak out.

In the reflection at right, Laura Ihonvbere, a first-year middle school assistant principal and a graduate student in our educational leadership program, describes a similar situation and her response. This column is the first of several co-written with graduate students working in the field with a culturally proficient, social justice lens developed by the education and community leadership masters program at Texas State University-San Marcos.

— Patricia L. Guerra and Sarah W. Nelson

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I had a father come in one afternoon to talk about a problem on the bus with his daughter. He had a thick accent. Although I didn't ask, it would be my best guess that he was from somewhere in South America. He told me that a girl on the bus had verbally threatened his daughter with physical violence. She told his daughter she was going to beat her up. He described his daughter as a quiet girl who never got in trouble. He described the student that threatened her as "an African-American girl." Neither he nor his daughter knew the girl's name. As we talked through the problem, he expressed concern for his daughter's safety as any parent would. I told him that we had video cameras on the buses and that I would call transportation, view the video, and hopefully discover the identity of the girl. I assured him we were equally concerned about the safety of our students and I would investigate the situation to the best of my ability. I also suggested that since the end of the school day was 10 minutes away, he might want to take his daughter home for the day so I would have the next day to complete my investigation and take action if necessary.

He seemed satisfied with the outcome of our discussion and rose to leave my office. I shook his hand and promised to call him the next day to follow up with him. As he turned to

leave, he said, “I appreciate your help. You know how those people can be.” Unsure what people he was referring to, I said that adolescents are indeed full of emotion and sometimes difficult to deal with. He replied, “No, I mean blacks. They think they can do whatever they want to people.” After closing my mouth, which had probably dropped open at this point, I disagreed and said, “Inappropriate behavior is not a quality reserved for African-American children.” I continued, “In my life, I have met people of all races who had wonderful qualities and positive attributes as well as people of all races who unfortunately did not. It is not my experience that bad behavior is limited to one group of people.” He said no

more, but gave me a look that showed he did not share my opinion and left.

I sat for a moment, a little stunned by our conversation. Later, I described the situation to my principal and confessed that I wasn’t sure if I handled it correctly. Did I say too much or too little? Our district has a goal this year to improve customer service for our parents. Did balancing this goal and my need to address a blatant example of racism cause me to handle the situation badly? A month later, I still think about this situation and am unsure. I do not believe that I was rude. In fact, I believe I did not say enough.

I will continue to address instances of racism as an administrator — it will happen again, unfortunately. I think at

a different time and place in my life, before my graduate work in cultural proficiency, I may not have even said what I did. I would not have known what or how to say anything. This is growth for me. I have been involved in other important conversations since then and feel this is something I am consistently improving and handling better. I will not berate myself about this, but take it for what it was, an opportunity for continued personal growth. I must continue to challenge deficit beliefs when I encounter them, both in my professional life and with my own children. I know that I cannot change the beliefs of others, but I cannot condone racism. ■

ALTHOUGH THIS EXPERIENCE was unsettling, Laura Ihonvbere made several valuable discoveries about herself that day. Most importantly, she demonstrated that she works with a moral imperative (Fullan, 2003). She has the courage to do what’s right regardless of personal risk. Additionally, she has the skills to effectively handle this type of encounter, and she knows that if she follows a few guidelines, speaking out does not have to result in a heated argument.

What guidelines did Ihonvbere follow?

1. She understood it was pointless to preach or argue with the parent, because she knew one interaction would not change his deeply seated beliefs. Released from this strong urge to change his beliefs, her motive for speaking out was to send a clear message that his racist remarks were not tolerated in school.
2. She listened carefully to what the parent had to say rather than dismissing his comments.
3. She stayed calm during the entire interaction, which allowed her to think quickly on her feet and disagree in as matter-of-fact manner as she could.
4. Despite the fact that Ihonvbere has a son who is biracial, she did not take the parent’s remarks personally but remained emotionally detached to prevent the interaction from escalating into a heated debate where neither side hears the other. She also avoided the use of hot-button phrases such as, “I can’t believe you just said that” or “that’s a racist comment,” so the parent did not become defensive and feel the need to retaliate. She did not use body language and facial expressions (e.g. rolling her eyes) that sent judgmental messages about the parent’s views.
5. By stating that both “inappropriate behavior” and “wonderful qualities and attributes” were found in all groups of people, Ihonvbere countered his stereotypical view.

Although this one interaction is not likely to change this parent’s beliefs, the interaction informed the parent that his view is not universally shared and that such views are unacceptable.

Speaking out against racist remarks and deficit beliefs is never easy. But as Ihonvbere discovered, the more you engage in these critical conversations, the more the fear dissipates, communication skills improve, and self-confidence builds. As a result, the more likely you are to challenge statements that demean students and families and harm the teaching and learning process. Being willing to do what is right even when it’s difficult is what it means to be a culturally proficient educator.

Reference

Fullan, M. (2003). *The moral imperative of school leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

— Guerra and Nelson