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COMMENTARY

Colorblind Education Is the 'Wrong Response'

By Dan French & Warren Simmons

When peaceful protests turned violent in Baltimore in April, the district closed public schools for a day. When schools reopened, district leaders encouraged principals and teachers to discuss the demonstrations in classrooms. They addressed the racial tension head-on and used it, as noted later in a district statement on the unrest, as a "teachable moment to reduce conflict and violence in our society."

While we applaud this response, we question why it took such a tragic event to prompt our schools—not only in Baltimore, but elsewhere—to begin an honest conversation about race.

Our concern is based on research we have released over the past 12 months on black and Latino males in Boston's public schools. In our work, we found reluctance on the part of teachers and administrators to talk about issues of race and gender. **The two-part study**—commissioned by the Boston school system and conducted by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, at Brown University, and the Center for Collaborative Education, in Boston—found that the city's black and Latino students are an increasingly diverse and growing population, with immigrant students from countries in Africa and the Caribbean being the fastest-growing groups.

In Boston, black and Latino males make up 78 percent of the total male enrollment of public schools, and they post lower attendance rates, higher suspension and dropout rates, and lower four-year graduation rates than their white and Asian counterparts. The aim of our study was to find out how schools doing comparatively better with black and Latino males were able to achieve their relative success.

In four case studies of such schools, we found that they all had the hallmarks of good schools: caring school cultures, professional collaborative communities, individualized instruction, and meaningful family engagement. Despite these positive characteristics, however, the schools still faced several barriers to being more successful with black and Latino male students. Chief among them, we found, was the fact that teachers and staff members preferred to take a colorblind approach to their work. And, with a few exceptions, they were generally reluctant even to discuss race and gender explicitly.

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Many well-intentioned teachers use this colorblind approach, but it is the wrong response for black and Latino boys, who may experience daily instances of prejudice and racism. Research suggests that using curriculum and instruction that is explicit about race and the impact of racism in schools and society promotes school cultures in which students of color feel more of a sense of belonging and empowerment. Such school cultures can lead to better outcomes for students of color.

A colorblind approach flies in the face of that knowledge. When educators say, "I'm colorblind" and claim not to see or be influenced by their students' race, the net result is that students of color, their experiences, and their perspectives become "invisible" in the classroom.

The problem of a colorblind education system is not specific to Boston or Baltimore. H. Richard Milner, the executive director of the Center for Urban Education at the University of Pittsburgh and the author of *Rac(e)ing to Class: Confronting Poverty and Race in Schools and Classrooms*, also found in his research that while most educators have good intentions, teachers were very uncomfortable talking about race and avoided doing so. We know that a key quality of good teachers is "knowing your kids."

When we went beyond the traditional race/ethnicity categories and included country of origin, it revealed a far more culturally and linguistically diverse black and Latino student population than the district had seen before. Educators need that kind of information to help them better understand and leverage their students' backgrounds as assets for learning.

In our research, teachers admitted that they lacked knowledge about their students' racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, but also acknowledged that knowing more would improve their teaching. Districts and schools need to provide this kind of information, as well as opportunities and training for faculty, parents, and students to talk about race, culture, and language.

If school leaders want to play a role in improving race relations and narrowing opportunity gaps in their districts and cities, they must work to abandon the colorblind approach. We recommend that urban districts like Boston that serve large numbers of students of color examine their student populations more closely.

Districts should recognize that black and Latino males need access to a rigorous curriculum that includes content reflecting their language, culture, and frames of reference. They need to see teachers and administrators who look like them. All of us must work harder to create schools that embrace students and families of all backgrounds, rather than places where some are asked to leave their cultures, languages, and experiences outside the schoolhouse door.

Dan French is the executive director of the Center for Collaborative Education, in Boston. Warren Simmons is the executive director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, in Providence, R.I.

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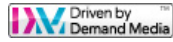
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