

Racism—The Enemy of Diversity in PreK-12 Schools

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Abstract

Unfortunately, racism continues to exist in PreK-12 schools in the US. From time-to-time, building level school staff members need to review the concepts of bias, prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and racism for present-day contextual understanding and self-reflection. Conceptualizing racism, as defined by micro-aggression, is important to having an up-to-date awareness of racism. The concept of white privilege gives school staff members an understanding of why and how students of color may view racism. An effective means of addressing racism in schools is the application of the contact theory to reduce prejudices. The concepts previously listed are discussed in this article in order to serve as reference points for school staff in: (1) reflecting on their attitudes and behaviors, (2) serving as a context to understand students' attitudes and behaviors, and (3) gleaning ideas for classroom activities flowing from the contact theory that can be used to minimize prejudice within and between students while reducing racism.

Keywords: racism, bias, prejudice, micro-aggression, white privilege, contact theory

Context

Unfortunately, racism is alive and well in the US, and schools are not immune to it. Tareen (2017) reported in a recent Associated Press article entitled “Racial Incidences On The Rise” that:

Maryland students using their shirts to spell a racial slur against black people at a rally. Pennsylvania students posing with swastika-carved pumpkins. A Montana student photographed with a gun accompanied with a racial epithet. Racial incidents are appearing to pop up at an alarming rate in the nation's public schools. (p. A-5)

Milner (2017/2018) notes that “many educators today covertly or tacitly believe racism has ended in schools and society” (p. 86). It has not, according to Milner, who indicates that many educators still do not understand that racism exists on the individual, systemic, institutional, and structural levels in PreK-12 schools and districts. While some school staff members may deny this, all of them need to recognize that racism exists and must be addressed.

From time-to-time, it is helpful for building level school staff to review basic concepts and behaviors that prompt racism in society and schools. Richardson (2017) observes:

that every change at an institution like a school has to begin with individual change. Since white educators make up the majority of teachers and administrators in U.S. schools, we can accomplish little in the realm of changing beliefs about race until we change ourselves. And we cannot improve the education of children of color until we understand the complex interplay of the racial experiences we bring to school every day. (p. 4)

Self-reflection by school staff members regarding their attitudes and behaviors is essential, as well as understanding—and identifying—attitudes and behaviors of students that are related to racism. Prevention of racist behaviors, either intentional or unintentional, is crucial for addressing those behaviors in schools. It is important for school staff members to understand how utilizing the contact theory can reduce prejudice and racism in schools in order that students may truly enjoy the benefits of diversity.

Diversity means students putting aside biases and prejudices and working effectively together with others they view as *different* for a variety of reasons. Such diversity means understanding that there are differences between students within a classroom and school and these differences, if properly addressed, are an asset to students' cognitive learning and social-psychological development. Diversity in schools represents inclusiveness of all students from various groups and perspectives to authentically and meaningfully work together and enjoy each other (Bartz & Rice, 2017a).

Macionis (2012, p. 326) states that racism is traditionally defined as the belief that one racial category of people is innately superior or inferior to another (e.g., White to African-American). Understand that by the traditional definition of racism both Whites and People of Color can be racists.¹ Tatum (2017) defines racism as “a system of advantage based on race,” that is controlled by Whites (p. 87). Hence, Tatum concludes People of Color cannot be racists. Tatum bases this conclusion on white privilege.

White Privilege

White privilege means that Whites benefit from racism (e.g., of African-Americans) and enjoy privileges simply because they are White, and the power Whites possess in virtually all aspects of life in the US. As previously noted, Tatum (2017) indicates that white privilege is “the systematic advantages of being White” and racism is a “system of advantages based on race” (p. 88). Whites often benefit from racism through unearned advantages that accrue by virtue of being White. Cole (2017) states that “white privilege refers to the collection and benefits that white people receive in a racially structured society in which they are at the top of the racial hierarchy” (p.1). An understanding by Whites regarding how they benefit from these privileges is often accompanied by an *emotional uncomfornableness* of guilt that hinders them from openly discussing racism (Tatum, 2017).

The economic positions of Whites in life are often aided because they are White in a society that is normed by Whites based on their experiences of Whites. Stated another way, Whites “did not acquire their position in life primarily due to their own efforts, but to a system normed and standardized on the experiences of whites” (Sue & Constantine, 2007, p. 14). Of course, there are exceptions to the white privilege theory. For example, poor White students—especially from rural areas of the US—have often been less likely than minorities and wealthy

Whites to be considered for admission to elite colleges and universities (Belkin, 2017). Examples of white privilege are:

- institutions having practices and procedures that favor Whites,
- whites having greater access to power and resources than People of Color,
- institutions bestowing privileges to Whites solely because of race, not because individuals deserve it,
- whites getting accepted to elite colleges (that historically have been disproportionately White) because applicants are White and their parents attended those colleges,
- whites having the ability to be a part of decision-making that affects everyone without having to take People of Color into account,
- whites being able to dismiss what People of Color say, if they so desire,
- whites being able to advocate that race is not an issue they have to address,
- whites being able to discount the worth of People of Color, if they so choose, and
- perceiving that what Whites want and do as *the norm* and that People of Color need to adhere to this norm. (Kendall, 2002, pp. 2-8)

While the term white privilege was coined by McIntosh in 1987—a White feminist at the exclusive Wellesley College in Massachusetts—the phenomenon has existed for centuries in the US (Tatum, 2017). Slavery and the economic systems in the colonies and then the U.S. were the foundations of white privilege.

Racism and Micro-Aggression

Racism comes in many forms. *Aversive* racism, for example, is represented by Whites who on one hand endorse principles of racial equality and overtly sympathize with People of Color, while on the other hand often have implicit bias feelings of discomfort, anxiety, and fear toward People of Color. Aversive racism is compared to blatant racism that intentionally—and with malicious intent—is aimed at People of Color. Aversive racism is often associated with several forms of micro-aggression racism, which has recently received considerable attention in the research community and mainstream media. People demonstrating aversive racism *unconsciously* behave verbally and nonverbally in manners that cause negative feelings and reactions in People of Color. In the end, behaviors trump unconscious knowledge with respect to aversive racism because it is the behaviors that have the negative impact upon People of Color (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008a).

Micro-Aggressions

Racism, as depicted through the concept of micro-aggression, is frequently used to define and explain modern-day racism in the US. Racial micro-aggression is defined as “brief, everyday exchanges that send degenerating messages to People of Color because they belong to a racial minority” (Sue & Constantine, 2007, p.137). Micro-aggressions are serious because of the negative impacts they have upon People of Color. Dominant group members (e.g., Whites) sometimes advocate that, while micro-aggressions are wrong and may be offensive, they do little harm. The receivers of micro-aggression behaviors—People of Color—consistently perceive that

such behaviors are harmful.

It is important to understand that the “micro” in micro-aggression is in the context of the sender’s perceptions (e.g. White person), not the receiver’s (e.g., African American). Sue et al. (2008b) note that “from the perspective of the sender, micro-aggression slights may appear to be trivial [micro], but they have serious effects on the target person or group (p. 329). Sellers, Chavous, and Cooke (1998) hypothesize that there is a *private and public regard* pertaining to understanding racism in the context of the “micro” in micro-aggression. Keels, Durke, & Hope (2017) explain that “*Private regard* represents an individual’s attitude toward their own racial-ethnic group in feelings about their racial-ethnic group membership. *Public regard* represents an individual’s perception of how others view their racial ethnic group” (p. 1,322). With some People of Color group members, the strength of private regard may be such that negative feedback with respect to public regard is somewhat neutralized. On the other hand, this may not be the case for many People of Color group members. The point is that the recipients of micro-aggression are who determine the extent of its negative impact, not those committing the behaviors that prompt the micro-aggression (Keels et al.).

General findings indicate that micro-aggressions “evoke powerful emotional reactions and increase in perceived stress [in the receivers], which is detrimental to the depressive symptoms in mental health in general” (Keels et al., 2017, p. 1,321). Harwood, Choi, Orozco, Browne Hunt, and Mendenhall (2015) opine that “micro forms of racism endured by students of color explain some of the educational differences between students of color and whites” (p. 2). Sehgal, Jeffries, and Rappaport (2017/2018) report that “black middle school students’ experiences with discrimination at school with both peers and teachers were negatively associated with self-reports of motivation to achieve belief about self-competency, and positive self-esteem” (p. 52). Racism has a profound negative effect on the mental health of students of color in PreK-12 grade classrooms (Milner, 2017/2018).

Sue and Constantine (2007) identify three major types of micro-aggression: (1) micro-assaults, (2) micro-insults, and (3) micro-invalidations. *Micro-assaults* are verbal and nonverbal explicit racially derogatory behaviors based on explicit bias purposefully intended to prompt negative feelings (hurt) in those at whom they are aimed (p. 137). Examples of micro-assaults are name calling, intentional isolation of an individual, and purposeful discriminatory actions. Micro-assaults are conscious and deliberate behaviors.

Micro-insults are indirect verbal and nonverbal actions based on implicit bias that communicate stereotypical beliefs (Sue & Constantine, 2007, pp. 137-138). This includes insensitivity, rudeness, and demeaning behaviors regarding another person’s ethnic heritage, racial identity, or both. Senders of micro-insults are usually unaware that they are doing so.

Micro-invalidations are “communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a racial-ethnic minority individual” (Keels et al., 2017, p. 1,318). Micro-invalidations directly attack the racial or ethnic identity of Persons of Color and attempt to replace it with *White America’s norms*. This results in damaging consequences to the targeted individuals (Sue & Constantine, 2007).

Mendenhall has identified a fourth type of micro-aggression she references as *environmental*. She defined environmental micro-aggression as “widespread insensitive symbols, like mascots, as well as white people occupying a majority of the country’s powerful and honorable positions” (Wickman, 2017, p. 3).

Six general themes that add an understanding to micro-aggressions are:

Theme #1 – Assumption of Intellectual Inferiority: Micro-aggressions that assume People of Color are intellectually inferior, inarticulate, or void of common sense;

Theme # 2 – Second-Class Citizens: Micro-aggressions that treat People of Color as a lesser person than Whites by inference or direct comparison;

Theme #3 – Assumption of Criminality: Micro-aggressions that communicate People of Color are likely potential criminals, often demonstrate antisocial behavior, and are prone to violence (this is especially assumed of African-Americans);

Theme #4 – Assumption of Inferior Status: Micro-aggressions that communicate People of Color are more likely to occupy lower status career positions, have lower economic and social status, and/or are culturally inept;

Theme #5 – Assumption of Universality of the People of Color’s Experiences: Micro-aggressions that communicate the expectation that a given Person of Color “speaks” or represents all People of Color from his/her racial-ethnic group; and

Theme #6 – Assumed Superiority of White Cultural Values/Communication Styles: Micro-aggressions that deem People of Color’s cultural values and communication styles inferior to those of Whites and advocate People of Color should adopt *White standards* (Sue et al., 2008a).

Keels et al. (2017) found that applying micro-aggression to high school students revealed that “Greater exposure to micro-aggressions during high school may stunt students’ academic, emotional, and identity development; leading them to enter college less prepared for academic and social adjustments” (p. 1,323). Specifically, Keels et al. found that: (1) minority students transitioning to college from majority non-White high schools perceived increased exposure via micro-aggressions (especially in the context of academic inferiority); (2) racially/ethnically hostile educational contexts are detrimental to minority students’ academic achievement and their mental health; and (3) for micro-aggressions to decrease, it is necessary for minority students to communicate their experiences with micro-aggressions to Whites such that it is understandable to Whites and builds empathy for them. This causes Whites to personalize members of a minority group (People of Color), and understand the negative impacts micro-aggressions have on them (p. 1,323).

Bias, Prejudice, and Discrimination² **(The Engines That Drive Racism)**

Biases come in two forms: (1) explicit and (2) implicit. *Explicit bias* means that attitudes of individuals—and behaviors flowing from them—are knowingly and intentionally based on prejudices and societal stereotyping of individuals because of race, ethnicity, or both (Kirwan Institute, 2015). The stimulus for prompting explicit bias is often a perceived threat to an individual’s personal values and beliefs.

Implicit or unconscious bias means that people unknowingly possess attitudes about others based on prejudices and stereotypes prompted by race, ethnicity, or both. Such unconscious biases can affect people’s understanding, actions, and decisions (Kirwan Institute, 2015). These unconscious biases can have a crucial and problematic effect on judgments of People of Color. Both explicit and implicit biases can cause a perception of favorability, but most often are referenced to negative attributes.

According to Macionis (2012, pp. 323-324), *prejudice* is a rigid and unfair generalization

about an entire group or category of people (e.g., African-Americans). In its simplest form, prejudice means to *prejudge*. Macionis (p. 324) further states that *stereotyping* is a specific form of prejudice that is a simplified description attached to each person from a group or category of people (e.g., African-Americans). Prejudices and stereotypes represent attitudes, while *discrimination* is biases and prejudices displayed through actual behavior and actions. *Institutional prejudice and discrimination* means that biases and prejudices are engrained into the operations of schools, the district, and/or how school staff operate. As an example, a board of education may have an affirmative action policy, but not advertise or post teacher openings in colleges and universities that predominately serve People of Color. *Ethnicity* refers to a group with a shared cultural heritage (e.g., Native Americans). Figure 1 depicts the relationship between race and ethnicity (Macionis, p. 320).

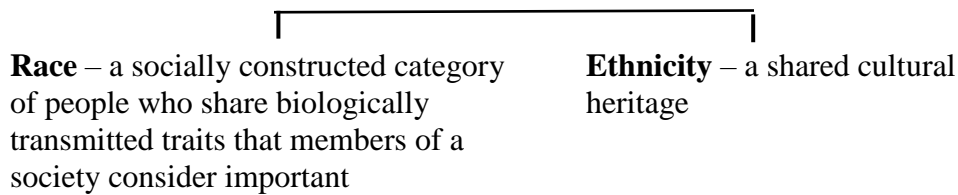


Figure 1. Relationship of race and ethnicity.

Racial-ethnic identity includes how individuals perceive, interpret, and cope with experiences—positive and negative—in their daily lives because of their racial-ethnic identity (Macionis).

Contact Theory—An Intervention Schools Can Use to Reduce Racism

Intergroup contact (contact theory) between Whites and People of Color helps reduce prejudices and, thus, racism. Results from Pettigrew’s and Tropp’s (2006) exhaustive meta-analysis study of 713 independent samples from 515 studies “provides substantial evidence that intergroup contact can contribute meaningfully to reductions in prejudice across a broad range of groups and contexts” (p. 766). This trend was applicable for racial and ethnic samples.

The classic endeavor of the effects of intergroup contact is Gordon Allport’s (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*. He identified four factors necessary for the reduction of prejudices between groups through the contact theory: (1) equal status, (2) intergroup cooperation (non-competitive environment), (3) common goals, and (4) institutional support. From their meta-analysis, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) concluded that while, Allport’s four factors were not essential for positive intergroup contact resulting in prejudice reduction, “carefully structured contact situations designed to meet Allport’s optimal conditions [four factors] achieved a markedly higher mean effect size [result] than did other samples” (p. 766). It is important to note that Allport’s four factors work in concert with each other and maximize the effects which each has for a collective benefit.

The contact theory is applied in many schools throughout the US to enhance Whites’ and People of Color’s perceptions of each other and reduce prejudices that can lead to racism. From their massive study, coupled with their expertise with the contact theory, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) conclude that: (a) interaction reduces prejudice because familiarity breeds liking one

another; (b) the phenomenon of increased liking of others is not limited to Allport's four factors, but "likely under a wide range of conditions" (p. 766); (c) this increase in liking others by the exposure through contact and interaction can be generalized to a greater liking for unknown individuals from the *outgroup* (i.e., groups other than one's own which is the *ingroup*); and (d) interactions reduce anxieties which results in increasing the degree of liking of outgroup members. For example, familiarity through contact of Whites with African-Americans causes an increase of liking African-Americans in general by Whites and vice-versa.

Pettigrew (1998) and Everett (2013) postulate that the contact theory causes change through four processes: (1) learning about outgroup(s) and its members; (2) a mindset change toward outgroup members resulting in positive behavioral adjustments toward them; (3) generating affective linkages through reduction of negative emotions, increase in positive emotions (i.e., empathy), reducing anxiety, and establishing friendships; and (4) ingroup reappraisal—reflecting and adjusting how one thinks about beliefs and perceptions.

Werner's (2016) approach to applying the contact theory for reducing prejudice can be seen in Figure 2.

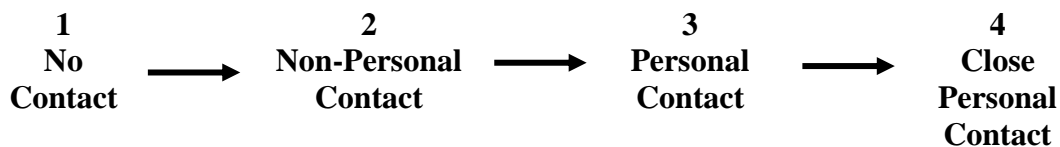


Figure 2. Applying the contact theory for reducing prejudice.

He utilizes a continuum of four forms of intergroup contact on a spectrum. **(1) No contact** leaves the reduction of prejudices of students totally to chance regarding the variables that cause the present conditions of prejudice. **(2) Non-personal contact** is students experiencing contact with information and knowledge about outgroups. It is optimal to use a multicultural educational approach that emphasizes understanding of members of outgroups, and teaching critical thinking skills to analyze and determine how to apply the information. Werner believes that, "Education reduces negative outgroup attitudes [prejudices]" and notes that, "Where there is little information about another group [outgroup], there is more likely to be more prejudice" (p.3). In essence, common knowledge about outgroups decreases negative attitudes and, thus, prejudices toward outgroups' members.

For **(3) personal contact** to be most effective in reducing the prejudices of students, the presence of Allport's four conditions are paramount: (1) common goals, (2) equal status between groups, (3) cooperative environment (non-competitive), and (4) institutional support (e.g., school's vision and mission). Close and authentic positive interaction that involves disclosure (e.g., sharing of feelings) is most beneficial. A positive classroom culture that fosters social trust through students feeling good about their classmates, classroom activities, and the teacher nurtures the reduction of prejudice toward outgroup members (Werner, 2016).

(4) Close personal contact is best exemplified through meaningful intergroup friendships. This one-to-one bonding through a friendship with an outgroup member results in generalized positive feelings to all outgroup members and reduces prejudices. The aforementioned may even result in reduced prejudices to other outgroups (e.g., Latino and its group members). This phenomenon is called the Secondary Transfer Effect (Werner, 2016). Further, other ingroup students knowing that a member of their ingroup has a friendship with an

outgroup member are prompted to have more positive attitudes toward outgroup members and reduce prejudices (Levy, Rosenthal, & Herrera-Alcazar, 2010).

The following are suggestions which teachers can use through classroom activities to apply the contact theory for reducing prejudices and, thus, racism. They include:

- structuring and organizing the classroom so that aggression and hostility are reduced among students and between the teacher and students, with a special emphasis on reducing aggression and hostility based on factors such as race and ethnicity,
- systemically planning how to establish a classroom culture and climate that emulates diversity in the context of inclusiveness of all students focused on creating a sense of *oneness* for class identity and cooperation,
- eliminating social subgroups that ostracize others,
- encouraging and supporting friendship among students, especially for racial-ethnic groups in the classroom,
- assigning informal small-group learning activities in a space for groups to congregate and to cooperate in developing peer-help programs,
- teaching diversity in the context of showing how differences among people (especially race/ethnicity) are strengths, especially for problem solving,
- creating situations in which children receive positive feedback from students of all racial, ethnic, economic, and social groups in the classroom,
- using the cooperative learning model, with emphasis on positive interdependency and the value of working with others to accomplish tasks and solve problems,
- helping students identify heroes and role models from their racial-ethnic group through lesson plans and activities so they have examples of people they want to emulate and serve as role models,
- using activities that emphasize social interaction with a heterogeneous mix of students, especially by racial-ethnic groups,
- incorporating activities that encourage students to talk about their emotions, listening to their classmates, expressing their true feelings, and reflecting on what motivates people,
- using a multicultural approach that is coupled with critical thinking skills,
- encouraging nonjudgmental and non-disruptive venting of emotions rather than negative verbal and physical aggression,
- monitoring interaction in the classroom to eliminate teasing, bullying, and negative feedback,
- emphasizing the need to be sensitive to the feelings of other students,
- helping students accept and appreciate individual differences,
- eliminating social subgroups that ostracize others,
- displaying and reinforcing a sincere caring and feeling for the uniqueness of each student,
- demonstrating to students that each is a special person and has strengths that will help her/him to be successful,
- developing a curriculum component that specifically teaches effective interpersonal skills,

- structuring activities so that there is active participation and every student's achievement is recognized,
- demonstrating positive social skills in the way you interact with students and others,
- teaching students various methods of relaxation, such as deep muscle relaxation and deep breathing, for times when they need strategies to reduce anxiety, and
- teaching students to handle conflicts and rule violations through negotiations and peer mediation (Bartz, 2016; Bartz & Rice, 2017b).

Additional Thoughts

An interesting approach to eliminate racism through bias reduction is the Common Ingroup Identity Model by Gaertner and Dovidio (2000). The model addresses the reduction of bias between ingroups and outgroups (e.g., African-Americans and Whites) based on the *social identity concept*. This approach utilizes the social identity concept by focusing on breaking down bias barriers such that there is a sense of *oneness* created between the ingroup and outgroup members and students' needs for positive self-identity are met. The Common Ingroup Identity Model "postulates that by recategorizing outgroup members into the common ingroup, one's positive attitudes toward the ingroup would be extended to those previously construed as outgroup members" (Dach-Gruschow & Hong, 2006, p. 126). The model has excellent utility for use in PreK-12 education.

In a recent study pertaining to the effects of teacher bias on student attainment by race, Gershenson and Papageorge (2018) conclude that: "Our analysis supports the conventional wisdom that teacher expectations matter" (p. 65). It is essential that teachers communicate verbally and through their behaviors that they have high expectations for students to behave in a non-racist manner. Teachers must strive to create a classroom culture and climate that emulates diversity in the form of students embracing the inclusion of all and creating a sense of oneness as a focal point for group identity.

Hammond (2015) in his book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, discusses the importance of *trustful relationships* within a classroom. Two key components necessary to achieve this trusting relationship are *rapport* and *alliance*. Mitchell, Hinueber, and Edwards (2017) describe these two key elements as: "*Rapport* refers to the degree to which teachers have established trust by affirming and validating student experiences. *Alliance* refers to a sense of shared mission between teacher and student in achieving a set of agreed-upon goals" (p. 27). Hammond's trusting relationship factor operationalized through *rapport* and *alliance* fits well with teachers' utilization of the contact theory and Common Ingroup Identity Model.

Summary Remarks

Racism in PreK-12 schools in the U.S. must be aggressively addressed by school staff at the building level. The vast majority of school staff work hard, day-in, day-out, to combat racism in their classrooms and school. Understanding the concepts of micro-aggression racism and white privilege—along with bias, prejudice, and discrimination—furnish staff members with reference points for self-reflection and better comprehension of the attitudes and behaviors of students in the context of racist behaviors. Lastly, the classroom practices and activities built on

the contact theory will help school staff members as they proactively take actions to prevent racism.

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Footnotes

¹People of Color “includes people of African descent, people of Asian descent, people of Latin American descent, and indigenous people (sometimes referred to as Native Americans or American Indians” (Tatum, 2017, p. 94).

²All definitions except diversity are from *Sociology* by J. J. Macionis, 2012, Boston, MA: Pearson. Further, portions of this section are from *Bias—The Enemy of Diversity and Objectivity for Educational Leaders* by D. E. Bartz, 2017. Manuscript submitted for publication.