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Wisdom of the Elders:

Does Race Impact Adult Relationships in Schools?

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Specifically, educators need to address their own racial attitudes, beliefs, and expectations as they relate to their students of color as well as their White students. When the conversation focuses initially on the educators' own racial consciousness, identity, and experiences, they can better understand the way in which they may be interpreting their students' academic interests and engagement. (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 73)

School improvement and professional development efforts over the last 30 years have recognized the importance of collaboration among educators. Schmoker (2006) stresses the importance of shared goals and collaborative improvement efforts. Dufour and Eaker (1998) emphasize the role of professional learning communities in improving student achievement. Barth (2006) explores adult relationships in schools, stating that they are one of the most important influences on student accomplishments, and that collegial relationships have the most positive impact on those accomplishments. Bryk and Schneider (2002), based on their analysis of the relationship between the level of trust among adults and student achievement in a number of Chicago schools, believe that there is a strong connection between relational trust and student learning.

As two long-time educators who have been involved in many professional development and school improvement efforts, Elaine and I often discuss the limited impact of these efforts and wonder what it would take for schools to significantly improve student achievement, particularly for students of color. It is important to know that we have a "cross-race" friendship; I am White and Elaine is African American. Part

of our friendship is based on exploring our different experiences and the impact of race on our varying perspectives. As a result of our many conversations, we were curious about how race may impact the development of collegial adult relationships, which we believe are a prerequisite for effective professional development and school improvement activities.

We decided to explore this question by talking with teachers about their perceptions concerning the impact of race on adult relationships in schools. Michelle Foster (1998) interviewed three groups of teachers, representing three different eras in the development of our educational system: elders, veterans and novices. She defined elders as teachers who began their careers during the 1920's through the 1940's, witnessing the desegregation of our schools. We chose to interview a different group of elders, representing those teachers who began teaching during the 1960's and 1970's, a time of renewed commitment to civil rights and equal opportunities. Many of them became teachers because of a desire to impact the academic success of minority and underachieving students. We thought it important, as this group of teachers begins to retire, to capture their experiences and wisdom regarding the nature of adult relationships in schools and the impact of these relationships on student achievement, particularly the achievement of students of color.

Elaine and I interviewed ten teachers from a large suburban school district, all of whom have taught for at least 25 years and are considered by their colleagues to be effective and successful teachers (See Insert #1). We asked each person the same six questions (See Insert #2). Elaine and I were both present at all interviews. Interviews, most lasting approximately one hour, were taped and transcribed. We coded interview

data separately, using the “progressive process” of sorting, defining, and relating the data (Glesne, 1999). We then compared and discussed our reactions, identifying emerging “themes”. We focused our analysis on the development of adult cross-race collegial relationships and the perception of how these relationships impact student achievement.

Does Race Impact Adult Relationships In Schools and

Do Adult Relationships Impact Student Achievement?

“Absolutely. Race impacts relationships of everyone in society so it definitely impacts it in the schools...probably more so than many other professions...”

-African American teacher

“It shouldn’t, but my gut tells me that it does.”

-White teacher

All of the teachers we interviewed felt that race does impact the development of collegial relationships among teachers. There was a distinct difference, however, in the tone of their responses. While White teachers were hesitant to say yes, African American teachers were adamant in their responses, using words such as “definitely” and “absolutely” and telling stories from their experiences to illustrate their points. White teachers couched their responses in words to demonstrate that they did not believe it should be true, but that perhaps it may be.

When asked whether they felt the adult relationships in a building impact student achievement, every interviewee said yes, with little difference between African American and White responses. Many mentioned that collegiality is necessary for staffs to develop meaningful common goals and improvement strategies as a way to improve student

achievement. They mentioned the importance of having conversations about student work. Everyone felt that it is important for educators to be able to honestly talk with each other about specific student needs and academic work, as well as teachers' related classroom practices. Sadly, only one of our interviewees indicated experiencing collegiality as a norm; most indicated that they had rarely experienced collegiality as the norm in a school, with parallel play and congeniality being more common. We were somewhat heartened to hear that most interviewees had not experienced adversarial relationships as the norm.

Two teachers' comments were particularly compelling. An African American teacher felt that "if my colleagues see me as competent...if their belief system allowed themselves to see me as competent...then when they go back into that classroom they see a little Black girl that almost looks like me (they may think) I could help her. She can make it." A White teacher lamented the fact that he/she didn't have more cross-race collegial relationships, "I don't need a lot of hints and help to understand kids who are like me when I was their age. I get it. It's other kids that are facing situations that I never faced where I can use help." It is clear that the teachers we interviewed believe that collegial relationships are important to student achievement and that cross-race relationships may have specific benefits for improving the achievement of students of color.

What Are The Obstacles To Developing Cross-Race Collegial Relationships?

Elaine and I felt we had stumbled on a "Catch 22." If teachers believe that developing more collegial relationships will improve student achievement, and if teachers believe that race does impact the development of collegial relationships among adults,

what stands in the way of cross-race collegial relationships? When asked to discuss the obstacles to cross-race collegial relationships, there were significant differences in the responses of the African American and White teachers we interviewed.

Culture

Culture was the obstacle identified most frequently by African American interviewees. This included a number of things: language, use of touch, facial expressions, confrontation styles, and competition versus cooperative styles. Generally, African American interviewees felt that Whites have difficulty expressing themselves directly, say one thing when they really mean another, use facial expressions that don't match the content of what they are saying, do not like to confront issues directly but rather "beat around the bush", and are much more competitive than African Americans. This difference in styles, as perceived by African Americans, creates a situation in which they don't feel as though they can trust Whites. Some of their statements included:

"I come from an environment of culture where we used to say 'Good Morning' to each other...and then you arrive in these environments and people go about their daily business without speaking...how can you form a collegial relationship with people when they don't speak to you?"

"This smiling when you are upset versus you know having the facial and everything match your emotion is one cultural difference in communication."

"And yet I found some people kind of false in the collaborative thing and then they will go off and do their own thing...trying to out show you... (this) tended to be more White teachers."

Whites, on the other hand, were hesitant to say there are significant cultural differences between African Americans and Whites. As one teacher said, “I think every human being, no matter what your ethnicity is, whether you are French or German, and both Caucasian, everybody has their own culture.”

Fear

Both African American and White interviewees identified fear as an obstacle, however they meant very different things. While discussing colleagues, one African American teacher said, “I sensed she had a fear of Black people,” and continued, “There are certain Black people that I think White people find it more safe to talk to and then they actually have a fear of other people.” Another said, “I know seeing us together makes other people very uncomfortable so we have to be very careful. People are always puzzled by three of us (African Americans) together.” In contrast, Whites mentioned fear of offending African Americans, fear of not being “politically correct”, fear of being negatively judged by African Americans, and fear of being seen as racist. As one teacher said, “To be honest it’s probably because my life was pretty White for a long period of time...more of that comfort level of just being comfortable with your own race.”

Trust

Similarly, trust was also mentioned as an obstacle by both African American and White interviewees, but with very different perspectives. African Americans mentioned the need to “shift” their language and demeanor when around Whites, and as one teacher indicated, this makes it “difficult to relax around whites.” Conversely, one White teacher said, “African Americans seem secretive,” summarizing the feeling of many of the White interviewees that African Americans seem hesitant to be open with Whites. “African

American teachers are very private, you know they've learned to kind of close in the ranks or close in on themselves. Some wouldn't even share their phone number with staff and that kind of thing." One White teacher felt that African American teachers may seem closed to Whites because "Black teachers are in an uncomfortable double role of being a teacher but also sometimes being the only Black person in the group of teachers ...they are the explainers and they have to be in a double role of being a teacher but also being a Black person."

Numbers

Finally, every White teacher we interviewed mentioned the small number of African American teachers, most identifying this as the biggest obstacle to cross-race collegiality.

"I think it's easier (to develop same-race collegial relationships) because there are more of them. There are more people like me."

"We have never had a lot of diversity on our staff...and that's where you have to start...you know the majority of the relationships that you have...all the people involved are White."

"I'm in the majority and that's who I deal with most of the time. I mean I haven't had a lot of experiences with working closely with African American teachers."

What Are The Implications For Professional Development?

We, whether White or of color, need to deepen our own understanding of the systemic nature of racism, its impact on each of us, and how to interrupt it. Such a shared understanding not only creates common ground for the cultivation of friendship, it also is a prerequisite for the

transformative education we need for a more just society. (Tatum, 2007, pages 103-104)

If schools are serious about improving student achievement by developing professional learning communities and implementing collaborative improvement efforts, the obstacles to developing cross-race collegial relationships must be considered when planning these efforts. We believe cross-race collegial relationships are an important prerequisite to improving student achievement, particularly the achievement of students of color. We learned much about this from the “elders” we interviewed, and we think their knowledge, wisdom and experience have much to offer professional developers.

- Issues of race, including its impact on adult relationships in schools, must be part of the school improvement discussion. Many of our “elders” told us, however, that these discussions should not occur in a vacuum, but must be continually connected back to classroom practice. Every teacher we interviewed felt that focusing on students facilitated the development of collegiality. As we become more racially conscious, we must always reflect upon and discuss how our learning impacts our practice.
- We can’t talk meaningfully about race with strangers; we must have opportunities to get to know each other on a personal level.
- Conversations need to take place in facilitated small groups, with guidelines to help people feel safe. Staff meetings are not the best venue for this type of discussion.
- Time must be allocated so that people are able to tell their stories and reflect upon their own and others’ experiences, without feeling rushed.

- Discussions must happen over time, rather than during “one-shot” activities. Racial consciousness evolves slowly, through a complex process including discussion, reading and reflection.
- Perhaps most importantly, we believe that conversations must be facilitated by trained, cross-race pairs of facilitators. Given the different perspectives of African Americans and Whites, it is important that both of these perspectives be considered in planning and legitimized in implementation.

Conversations about race are never easy. One of our interviewees stated that they are sometimes “too courageous.” However, if we truly believe that adult collegiality is necessary to improve the achievement of all students, we must develop practices to facilitate cross-race collegial relationships. Both students and adults will reap the benefits.

Insert #1

Characteristics of Teachers Interviewed

Number of Years Taught*	Fewest – 25	Most – 41	Average – 32.4
Level	Elementary – 7	Middle School – 2	High School – 1
Gender	Male – 2	Female – 8	
Race	African American – 5	White – 5	

*4 of the teachers interviewed were retired at the time of the interview

Insert #2

Interview Questions

How would you characterize the majority of relationships you have observed among co-workers?*

Does race impact the nature of the relationships among adults in schools? If so, how?

What, if any, are the obstacles that make it difficult to develop a collegial relationship with a co-worker of a different race?

Is it easier to develop collegial relationships with a member of your own race? If so, why?

If you have experienced a collegial relationship with a co-worker of another race, what factors facilitated the development of the relationship?

In what ways do you think the adult relationships in schools impact student achievement?

* We used Barth's (2006) definitions of four types of adult relationships: parallel play, adversarial, congenial and collegial and his definition of collegial as: 1) sharing teaching practices, 2) talking about teaching, 3) observing one another at work, and 4) supporting each others' success.

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