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Celebrating Race in the Classroom: Utilizing Multicultural Education and Intergroup

Contact to Combat Racial Threat in the Classroom

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Senior Capstone

CST 411: Communicating Across Barriers

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to utilize my experience as a volunteer in the classroom, the literature addressing Integrated Threat Theory, multicultural education, and intergroup contact/dialogue, and insight gained through interviews with teachers in racially diverse classrooms, to identify strategies and techniques that will help future volunteers and teachers succeed in racially diverse classrooms. Reviews of the literature on Integrated Threat Theory, multicultural education, and intergroup contact/dialogue provide background for a case study experience at De La Salle High School. Information presented in the literature is compared to the case study in the classroom and to interviews with teachers of diverse classrooms for the purpose of examining its congruence. Following a synthesis of the literature and experiences in the classroom, a list of practical strategies and tips are provided for future teachers and volunteers working in diverse classrooms to combat racial threat.

Celebrating Race in the Classroom: Utilizing Multicultural Education and Intergroup Contact to Combat Racial Threat in the Classroom

Introduction

Racial diversity in United States public schools has increased dramatically in the past thirty years, growing from an estimated 22% in 1972, to 42% in 2005 (Bowler & Thomas, 2005). This statistic from the Annual Report on American Schools Growth and Diversity supports the great need we have for addressing race in the classroom. More schools will be challenged to accommodate for diversity, finding ways to meet the needs of all of the students in the classroom, regardless of their race.

This will not be a simple task for teachers, administrators, or students, as communicating across racial barriers is often difficult and uncomfortable. In fact, race tends to be a taboo topic of discussion in American society, particularly in education, despite its self-proclamation as a racial/ethnic melting pot. This may be due, partly, to the long history of harsh conflict between the majority and minority groups. Unfair advantages still remain engrained in our economic and social systems in favor of the White majority. Minority groups frequently encounter laws, policies, institutions and prejudice that restrict the ways in which they live their lives (Oskamp, 2000). In education, a disproportionate number of Whites receive a quality education compared to blacks and other minority groups (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). With a long and continued history of conflict between racial groups, fighting for scarce resources in an unfair system, racial prejudice and discrimination are at the forefront of discussions about race today.

A leading theory addressing the existence of prejudice between racial groups is Integrated Threat Theory. Its authors, Stephan and Stephan (2000), propose that threats

and fears are the basis of our prejudices. According to Integrated Threat Theory, perceived threats or fears we have for our own group's existence are antecedents to prejudice against other racial groups. This means that the prejudices we develop toward other racial groups stem from our perceived threats or fears of those groups to the existence of our own group (Stephan & Stephan, 2000).

Several theories, programs, and techniques have been proposed to break down the prejudice and discrimination rampant in society today. Stephan and Stephan (2005) present four of these strategies commonly practiced to counter racial ignorance. Multicultural education and cultural diversity training help members of different races learn about and understand the circumstances faced by members of other racial groups, as well as techniques to help communicate and promote interaction between members of different racial backgrounds. Cooperative learning techniques and intergroup dialogue further this knowledge by providing opportunities to engage members of the other groups in interaction and dialogue. Stephan and Stephan (2000) describe each of these four techniques as functions working to counter racial ignorance by undermining the perceptions of threat that lead to racial prejudice.

The purpose of this paper is to apply and explore the success of these strategies to counter and remedy ignorance in a multiracial educational environment. Throughout the current semester I volunteered at De La Salle North Catholic High School, working twice a week with the advanced choir. I was a participant observer in the classroom, engaging with the students in activities and attending performances and events. De La Salle North Catholic High School, in 2001, was the first school in the nation to replicate a work-study/corporate internship-based private high school modeled after Cristo Rey Jesuit High

School in Chicago. As a “School that works” foundation, De La Salle is located in North Portland to serve students from underprivileged families (DLS mission, 2008). The majority of the students are from non-White, non-Catholic, and economically underprivileged families. In the choir, most of the students, the director and the accompanist are African American, leaving me and three other Caucasian students in the racial minority in the classroom. After spending time in the classroom as a Caucasian volunteer in a predominately African American classroom, and interviewing teachers in diverse classrooms, much of the literature addressing racial barriers became more salient for me. For this paper though I will focus on Integrated Threat Theory, multicultural education, and intergroup contact/dialogue, gaining insight into how they apply to my own experience at De La Salle. The aim of this paper is to utilize my experience as a volunteer in the classroom, the literature addressing Integrated Threat Theory, multicultural education, and intergroup contact/dialogue, and insight gained through interviews with teachers in racially diverse classrooms, to identify strategies and techniques that will help future volunteers and teachers succeed in racially diverse classrooms.

I begin the discussion by providing background from the literature on three areas related to my experience in the classroom: Integrated Threat Theory, multicultural education, and intergroup contact/dialogue. Findings in the literature are discussed as they related to my experience at De La Salle. Next, I discuss the prevalence of the threats to racial in-groups presented in Integrated Threat Theory, and how they can be addressed with applications from multicultural education and intergroup contact strategies. Then, I provide feedback and insight from my own experience of racial intergroup threats in the classroom and what worked and did not work for me to overcome threat. Finally, I provide

a synthesis of all of the literature and my own experiences communicating across racial barriers, offering a resulting description of strategies and recommendations for future volunteers and teachers working in diverse classrooms.

Background

Integrated Threat Theory

Stephan and Stephan (2000) founded Integrated Threat Theory in reaction to the failure of previous theories to account for racial prejudice. The authors of the theory found that prejudice was often deeply rooted in fear of other racial groups, usually stemming from perceived threats the other group posed to their own ingroup. Since its creation the theory has received much success in identifying the roots of prejudice. Threats to the ingroup are divided up into four different types: realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes. Perceptions of these threats depend on the antecedents of threat which includes: strength of identification with the ingroup, personal relevance of social policies favoring the outgroup, nature of the contact between the groups, knowledge of the outgroup, level of prior conflict between the groups, and relative statuses of the groups.

Realistic threats are real, tangible, physical threats to the very existence of a group such as warfare, political economic power, and health. Symbolic threats are less tangible, primarily involving perceived group differences in morals, values, standards, beliefs, and attitudes. These may be better explained as threats to the worldview of the ingroup. The third type of threat proposed by Stephan and Stephan (2000) is intergroup anxiety. Intergroup anxiety threats involve negative feelings of fear and threat derived from a concern for the outcomes of the self in interpersonal interactions with outgroup members

such as being embarrassed, rejected or ridiculed. The final type of threat in Integrated Threat Theory is negative stereotypes. Stereotypes serve as a basis for expectations for behavior of members of an outgroup; when they are negative it often contributes to negative outcomes in interaction with outgroup members which is associated with threat.

The final component of Integrated Threat Theory that makes it so powerful as a predictive factor are the relationships these four threats have with predicting attitudes of ingroup members toward outgroup members. In several studies, authors have utilized the same methodology used by Stephan and Stephan to design the theory, and have had great success.

For the purpose of this study, I focused on articles specifically addressing race in the context of threats, despite its use in other contexts of prejudice such as sexuality. One study conducted by Stephan et al (2002) examined the prejudice as it exists between Blacks and Whites in America. In the study they found significant results indicating that three of the types of threat, realistic threats, symbolic threats, and intergroup anxiety predicted Blacks' and Whites' attitudes toward the other group. Black students scored higher overall in levels of perceived threat, with the strongest predictor of outgroup attitudes being intergroup anxiety (Stephan et al, 2002). This meant that fear of interacting with members of the outgroup was closely associated with not liking the other group or viewing the other group negatively.

When examining the predictive relationships of the antecedents to threat to negative group attitudes between Whites and Blacks, the authors found negative contact with the outgroup to be the best predictor. Typically, findings indicated that the greater the amount of negative contact an individual reported with outgroup members, the more

realistic threats, symbolic threats, and intergroup anxiety he/she reported (Stephan et al, 2002). This then often lead to negative attitudes toward the outgroup, showing the obvious connection of antecedents to threat and the perceptions of threat to negative attitudes toward the outgroup. Overall the results indicated a greater variance in perceived threat and negative attitudes toward the outgroup in Whites than Blacks which, the authors propose, may be causally related to Blacks being consistently confronted with race in a culture in which the dominant race are Whites. Furthermore, a long history of oppression, slavery and racial prejudice that continues today through unfair systems of discrimination in government, education, businesses etc. may contribute to a more consistent outcome of threats and negative outgroup attitudes for Blacks (Stephan et al, 2002).

Riek et al (2006) conducted a more recent study also examining the relationship between threats and negative group attitudes. The authors found that as people perceive more intergroup competition, value violations, higher levels of intergroup anxiety, group esteem threats, and endorsement of negative stereotypes, the negative attitudes toward outgroups increases. The authors of the study also address limitations to research in Integrated Threat Theory, proposing a lack of causality found in the research. Previous studies only indicate correlation between antecedents to threat, threats, and negative outgroup attitudes, not causation between the different predictor variables. This is important to understand because though it may be possible that identification with the ingroup is related to higher levels of intergroup anxiety, it very well may be that the existence of anxiety to interact with outgroups may in turn, cause ingroup members to more closely identify with the ingroup. Nonetheless, implications of Integrated Threat Theory were abundant in my experience at De La Salle and in interviews with teachers;

racial threat can be detrimental to success in the classroom and is a problem that must be addressed.

Multicultural Education

Several functions exist to counter racial threat experienced in the classroom. One of the major movements geared toward the breakdown of racial barriers is multicultural education. Because this movement is directed toward improvements and equality in education, it is often thought of as a program for the others, discounting the importance and needs of the majority group, Whites. This though is only a myth as Banks (1989) indicates the multicultural education functions to bring equality to education for all students and to seek to provide the best education for each student in the classroom. The program thus far has had success and continues to do so as around 42% of students in classrooms are of racial minorities, ahead of the scheduled goal set by Banks in 1989 when he projected around 45% of students being minority students (Bowler & Thomas, 2005). Given its great success, it would serve as a great asset to the breakdown of racial threats presented in Integrated Threat Theory.

Banks (1989) described each of the five major components in the multicultural education movement, which include (1) content integration, (2) the knowledge construction process, (3) prejudice reduction, (4) an equity pedagogy, and (5) empowering school culture and social structure. The first component, content integration, deals with the extent to which teachers use examples, data and information from a variety of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds to illustrate the key concepts, principles and theories addressed in the classroom. This component pertains more readily to social studies and

language arts teachers than mathematics, or sciences, but is only one of the components implemented in multicultural education.

The second portion of multicultural education is the knowledge construction process. Achievement in the knowledge construction process involves the inclusion of discussions in the classroom about the ways in which implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence how that knowledge is constructed. Race, ethnicity, gender, social class etc. may have strong, yet subtle influences on how knowledge is constructed for the subject being taught in the classroom and should not go unnoticed (Banks, 1989). Significant progress has been made to address the knowledge construction process, but much more work is needed.

The last three dimensions in multicultural education pertain more closely to Integrated Threat Theory and race in the classroom. Prejudice reduction is the first of the three and as is implied in the name, is a focus on characteristics of children's racial attitudes and strategies to help students develop more positive racial and ethnic attitudes. According to Banks, (1989) research shows that children from minority racial groups are aware of racial differences and show racial preferences favoring Whites. This phenomena is likely related to how the dominant group is presented in the media as opposed to minority group members, and is certainly an issue that could be addressed in schools through multicultural education. The fourth portion of multicultural education is an equity pedagogy, which exists when teachers use techniques, and teaching methods that facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial and social class backgrounds (Banks, 1989). Cooperative learning is a tremendous asset for an equity pedagogy, encouraging students to engage and interact with one another across racial groups. Finally,

the fifth component of multicultural education is an empowering school culture and social culture, which will require the restructuring of the school so that students from diverse racial, ethnic and social-class groups will experience educational equality as well as a sense of social empowerment (Banks, 1989). This may be the most difficult of the components to implement and sustain given the many pieces of the puzzle that need to buy into the system of empowerment for all students. Altogether these five component parts constitute a movement for change in American school systems that will value and benefit all of the students in the classroom, regardless of racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds.

More recent research on multicultural education has examined the implementation of the multicultural education principles into systems of need and studied and outcomes. One such study surveyed education students working toward careers in education to find out their perceptions of the importance and sense of preparedness that have in teaching to a diverse classroom. Results indicated that the students understood and valued the importance of teaching to diverse classrooms, and felt prepared by their own education to teach across cultural barriers, though slightly less so when addressing preparedness. They also agreed that there was a great need for education related to teaching across racial and ethnic backgrounds (Whitfield et al, 2007). An interesting paradox discovered in the research was that, despite the students' acknowledgement of understanding a need to teach effectively across varied cultural backgrounds, the students did not indicate a need for providing a competitive atmosphere for students. The author suggests that this ideology may transfer into the development of lower expectations for students from minority racial groups, which research has indicated consistently, is detrimental to the success of minority students (Whitfield et al, 2007).

Another article examined multicultural education from a different angle, addressing the positive aspects of experiencing multicultural education when Whites are in the minority. From the beginning, this article emphasized the need for literature research of multicultural education experiences when the roles of majority and minority are reversed and Whites become the minority group (Closson & Henry, 2008). Research specific to this article found that at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), there remained a similar need for multicultural education as at historically white colleges (HWCs). One White professor entered a class full of African American students expecting for them to understand the extent to which they were oppressed in society and found students did not (Closson & Henry, 2008). There was a similar need in HBCUs as in HWCs to teach according to the principles of multicultural education, particularly with prejudice reduction and an equity pedagogy.

Intergroup Contact/Dialogue

Along with multicultural education, intergroup contact/dialogue serves as a building block to break down cultural barriers and the threats and fears related to cultural differences. Intergroup contact theory, developed by Pettigrew, indicates the importance of intergroup contact in breaking down racial barriers. Pettigrew notes specifically that a situations “friendship potential”, or possibility for long-term enhancement is essential for optimal intergroup contact to occur. Four conditions are of particular importance for optimal intergroup contact: equal group status within the situation, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and authority support (Pettigrew, 1998). Pettigrew (1998) also found that intergroup contact was governed by individual differences and societal norms (Pettigrew, 1998).

Intergroup contact/dialogue is very important in breaking down racial barriers as was shown in more recent articles. Closson and Henry (2008) found that though deliberate conversation in class directed at race and a discussion of racial issues was difficult, students and teachers alike benefitted from the experience when asked in self-reports following their experiences in both HBCUs and HWCs. Furthermore, several participants in the study indicated an enormous growth of self and self-discovery while learning about race informally through classroom experience with students and staff of different racial backgrounds. On White professor teaching in an HBCU expressed his groundbreaking experience of race: "The first day of class I really felt White . . . for the first time I experienced what it was like to be the 'other'." Obviously intergroup contact and dialogue about race in the classroom as a White teacher in a predominately Black classroom was a beneficial experience, helping him break down racial threats and fears. Boyd (2008), an African American female professor addressed her students in a letter regarding her appreciation for participation in a Cultural Contexts of Education course at the University of Mississippi. Teaching the class and interacting with the students opened not only the minds of the students, but also her own, gaining insight about herself through both intergroup contact and intergroup dialogue specifically addressing race (Boyd, 2008).

Volunteering at De La Salle: A case study

All of the research on Integrated Threat Theory, multicultural education, and intergroup contact/dialogue translated nicely into my experience at De La Salle High School. During the semester I volunteered twice a week at De La Salle in the music program. I attended the fourth period Advanced Choir class on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. As mentioned in the introduction, the racial demography of the group was

predominately African American, including the teacher, Mrs. A, the accompanist, and 22 out of the 25 students in the class. The three remaining students were Caucasian. Along with regularly attending class I attended performances, both on and off the De La Salle campus at which the students sang. The group sings predominately gospel music derived from the traditional Baptist churches of the Southern United States. In the interest of time and length I will focus my discussion of my experience toward particular experiences I had at the school in which phenomena described by Integrated Threat Theory, multicultural education, and intergroup contact/dialogue were evident.

Fear is a perfect identifier of the feelings I had when entering De La Salle High School for the first time. Prior to my arrival I found myself making assumptions about what the experience would be like, based on perceptions of the race and economic status of the students. As I entered the classroom for the first time I was very hesitant, sitting outside the door of the classroom for a few minutes before the previous class ended. I noticed an African American woman standing at the door talking on her cell phone and noticed myself immediately making judgments about her. Upon entering the classroom I expected to have little or no interaction with the students, all of whom were Black. To my surprise my experience was nearly the complete opposite as the four students in the classroom asked, "Can we help you sir?" in a very kind, genuine and accepting tone. All it took was that question and a few smiles to lessen my feelings of threat and fear. I had been at De La Salle for just a few minutes and had already had a life-changing experience. According to Integrated Threat theory, the perceptions of racial threat I experienced as I entered the classroom stemmed from the antecedents to threat. Looking back I identified a few that contributed to my feelings of fear and threat. First was the nature of the contact between

the Blacks and Whites, of which I knew only through the dark horror stories of slavery and oppression in history books. Second, was my very limited knowledge of the outgroup. Third, was level of prior conflict between the groups of which I had not experienced personally, but had heard stories of throughout my lifetime, and last was my assumptions about the relative statuses of the groups, classifying the students below me in the social hierarchy. Obviously I had a lot to learn and had my first experience of race in a negative manner—threats to my ingroup—and positive—breakdown of stereotypes and feelings of threat.

Multicultural education lays the groundwork for encountering and resolving racial threat. Choir at De La Salle has provided a great multicultural opportunity for me and for the students and staff in the classroom. Each day is a new and great experience for me to learn about another racial and socio-economic culture, and to share my own culture with the other students in the classroom. I think I have benefitted tremendously from the multicultural education elements in the classroom, probably more than the African American students because of my role as a racial minority member. In the classroom as a volunteer, I reap the benefits gained through exposure to the five major components in the multicultural education movement: (1) content integration, (2) the knowledge construction process, (3) prejudice reduction, (4) an equity pedagogy, and (5) empowering school culture and social structure. Having been restricted throughout my years in school, both K-12 and at the University of Portland, I rarely was given opportunities to meet Black people, to learn about their culture, and to gain understanding into their lifestyle and way of experiencing the world. Hence, the integration of content to finally include an African American perspective was empowering. Furthermore I was exposed to a diverse

knowledge construction process that accounted for both Caucasian and African American racial backgrounds. I was given the opportunity as well to break down and reduce my prejudices and hopefully contributed toward the breakdown of racial prejudice others had toward me. The school itself seemed to value and maintain an equity pedagogy but I have little evidence to indicate either way. Finally, the school, too, seems to empower students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds and limits any hierarchical social structure indicated through race.

One experience highlighted my own experience of multicultural education during my time at De La Salle. It was less than a week before a concert in which the students would perform at Macy's The Nines Hotel downtown at the Portland Monthly Light a Fire Benefit Dinner. Students prepared three songs to perform circling round the piano. I sang along with the students and following a break in the song one of the students shouted, "Man, he is cold." All of the students laughed and looked at me. In shock and surprise I smiled, sensing that he was talking about me, and that being "cold" in this context was a positive thing. Already embarrassed and confused, I asked the students what cold meant, and in unison they replied, "It means good." This was the breakthrough for me; I finally felt a sense of acceptance into the African American culture of the classroom and had experienced a moment of multicultural education.

Complemented by the five elements of multicultural education, intergroup contact and intergroup dialogue contribute significantly to the breakdown of threat. Integration to the classroom as a White volunteer was a difficult task for me. With limited experience and knowledge of the outgroup I would come in contact with, it required, time, energy, and skill acquisition to move past racial threat. Intergroup contact and intergroup dialogue most

distinctly enhanced my experience at De La Salle and provided the greatest challenge to threat. Positive contact with outgroup members at De La Salle included direct eye contact, shaking hands, friendly greetings and discussions with out group members etc.

Increasingly I became more comfortable, active and involved in the classroom community. At first I struggled to walk up to students and Mrs. A, even to say hello, but found that each successful attempt I made encouraged me to continue the endeavor and challenge my feelings of threat. As for the students I still feel that some of them feel threatened by me, either because of my race, my age, or my position as a volunteer. Limited to my interpretation I cannot be sure about the elements of racial threat taking place within each of the students. On the contrary, other students have indicated like those I have given them, signs of trust and care and courage to interact with them. One student in particular really surprised me one day as he instigated an interaction with me. Under false pretenses, and unjust judgments, I had classified this male student as a troublemaker and problem-student, both in and outside of the classroom. I had no expectations that he would be interested in interacting with me, and nor I him. Then, to my chagrin he addressed me one day, asking me, "Are you alright sir?" followed by a formal introduction and a casual conversation about one another's background. Particularly evident in this event were my negative stereotypes and negative attitude toward this student, a member of a racial outgroup, and yet a moment of intergroup contact with him broke down those negative stereotypes and negative attitudes for me toward him. Several other situations occurred in the same fashion throughout the semester as intergroup contact expanded my knowledge of the outgroup, brightening my attitudes of the outgroup members.

Racial Barrier Interviews

My knowledge and experience of race was further expanded through interviews with three different teachers, all of whom have different racial backgrounds and different racial demographics in their classrooms. The goal of these interviews was to further the perspective of this paper, making its findings applicable for both teachers and volunteers alike. The interviewees reflected on their own experiences of race both and outside of the classroom and discussed the implications as they related to the classroom. Participants in the interview process included: Mrs. A, an African American director of the De La Salle North Catholic High School, Mrs. L, a Caucasian elementary teacher in a private Christian school, and Mr. G, a Caucasian elementary school teacher, teaching fourth grade at a public school. The participants' answers were collected, divided among three sub-categories, and then integrated to find similarities and differences among their answers.

Interview questions addressed three distinct categories of experiencing race and racial barriers: racial identity/expression, communicating race, racial stereotypes or threats. The most interesting finding among the three interviews was in the amount of reflection taking place for the interviewee after being asked. Mrs. A, the African American choir director was quick to respond to every question, sharing experiences or thoughts she had had relating specifically to the question being addressed. It was clear that, as a member of a minority racial group, she had much more conscious experience of race day-to-day than the Caucasian interviewees. In fact, for a number of questions, both Mrs. L and Mr. G indicated that they had not experienced or thought about the situation addressed in a particular question. One question was particularly difficult for them, asking them to describe how they express their racial identity. Neither Caucasian participant clearly identified an expression of racial identity, whereas Mrs. A knew immediately her answer,

“several things, like eating ‘soul’ food from the South, listening to rap, hip-hop, and speaking in the African American vernacular.” It is possible, as is true in Mrs. A’s case, that minority group members more frequently cognitively process their racial identity than do members of the majority group so as to differentiate themselves from the majority group.

Another point of interest gathered from the interviews is how the interviewees perceived the outgroup’s view of the ingroup’s identity. Unlike the previous question, Mrs. L. and Mr. G quickly identified what they believed other outgroups thought of whites. The same was true for Mrs. A. Each of the interviewees did not wish to identify with these views of their own group’s identity, disregarding them as negative and untrue. This I found interesting because both groups indicated strong feelings about the outgroups perception of their own group even though they claimed them to be inaccurate. Clearly more intergroup contact and intergroup dialogue would help address the false perceptions existing between the two groups. Current assumptions, though false, seem to be leading toward negative attitudes toward outgroups.

Finally, the last point of interest illustrated in the interviews addressed communication styles of the interviewees when it involves racial barriers. The two Caucasian interviewees expressed more precautionary views, and avoid conflict negotiation styles when confronting conflict with outgroup members. Mr. G explained that in an interaction with a Black mother of a student in his class during parent-teacher conferences, he indicated feeling tension and conflict in their interaction related to race. His tactic was courteous avoidance, claiming to “probably not share everything about the student that he would have if conflicts of race had not been present.” On the contrary, Mrs. A attempts to confront a situation in which there is uncomfortable tension across racial

boundaries. She explained that, “when I enter the school and am met by someone who seems uncomfortable with me because of my race, I often walk straight toward them, maintaining eye contact and reach out to them, firmly shaking their hand and asking them how they are doing.” Her intent is to break down the barriers and tensions and to encourage contact with outgroup members. She admitted that this is not always the case and that certain situations may cause her to feel tense and nervous, avoiding a situation of race. I hypothesize that these differences across the two racial groups, between Mr. G and Mrs. A are related to their varied levels of experience with race. Mrs. A is confronted much more frequently with race than either of the other two interviewees which may lead to her feeling more comfortable when communicating across racial barriers. Similar hypotheses are indicated in Integrated Threat Theory and Intergroup Contact Theory.

Recommendations

Following the research, interview, and experiential learnings I had around racial barriers throughout a semester at De La Salle, I have synthesized all of the information into a list of recommendations. Of course my experience is subjective and my research is limited, but I feel there is a need for literature that addresses the practicalities of communicating across racial barriers. Many people, as I did, lack experience communicating across racial barriers. This final section of the paper aims to lay groundwork for future teachers and volunteers in situations involving race. There is a great need for racial integration, not only in government policies and educational programs, but also in day-to-day interactions with members of other racial groups. For volunteers becoming involved in multiracial schools, teachers with increasingly diverse classrooms, and for everyone that feels nervous, uncomfortable and unsure about interacting with

members of racial outgroups, here are some helpful hints that helped me to break down these fears and engage in a life-changing experience communicating across racial barriers.

Be Brave, Challenge Yourself

The hardest step to make is the first one. No matter how much your instincts tell you to turn around, to avoid contact, resist, and engage in the interaction. Intergroup anxiety, the third type of threat in Intergroup Anxiety often results from a fear of the outcome when interacting with outgroup members. Potential outcomes such as embarrassment, ridicule, or denial discourage ingroup members to engage members of outgroups (Stephan and Stephan 2000). With each positive experience you have communicating across racial barriers you will begin to feel freer, less hesitant to engage others of different races than your own.

Interact More Frequently with Outgroup Members

As she indicated in her interview, Mrs. A, a black woman who frequently interacts with members of the White community, experienced much lower levels of anxiety than Mr. G or Mrs. L when interacting across racial barriers. More experience leads to more familiarity, and more familiarity correlates with lessened feelings of fear and anxiety when interacting across racial barriers. Your sense of tension and awe will be replaced with a sense of normalcy as you spend more time with members of an outgroup. One of the best predictors for negative outgroup attitudes in Integrated Threat Theory is amount of contact with the outgroup. Stephan and Stephan (2000) found that individuals with more past contact with outgroups members were less likely to have negative outgroup attitudes. Obviously increased contact with outgroup members, and challenging yourself to interact

with someone of a different culture than you reduces the likelihood of negative attitudes about members of that group.

Be Yourself

Our natural tendency is to stray from everything that is normally who we are, to hide our true selves from others who are different from us. If you are not sure about who you are in an interaction across racial barriers, imagine what kind of success the person on the other side will have figuring out who you are. All three interviewees emphasized this point; honesty builds the relationship and trust becomes the foundation for success, which is particularly important in cross-racial relationships.

Be Interested in the Outgroup Culture

The fastest way to gain acceptance from an outgroup member is to express genuine interest in who they are and how they express themselves and live in the world coming from a different racial background. Mrs. A said it and I believe it, “if you come up to me and ask me about who I am, where I come from, and what makes me who I am, then I guarantee I will warm up to you and provide you with the same genuine interest and trust.”

Knowledge of the outgroup is also a great predictor of negative group attitudes toward racial outgroups (Stephan and Stephan, 2000). Genuine interest in the outgroup will increase your knowledge of the outgroup and decrease the possibility for negative attitudes toward the outgroup.

Be Honest and Trusting

One of the most basic traits of human nature is the ability to sense when something doesn't seem right. The same is true when interacting across racial barriers. Honesty on your behalf will often encourage the other person to be honest with you. This element of

trust is fundamental to the breakdown of racial threat. Interviews with Mrs. A, Mr. G and Mrs. L indicated that both Blacks' and Whites' perceptions of how the other group views them are false, and yet we remain divided because we do not trust each other in those truths. I cannot express enough what success you will have if you are honest in self-expression, and trusting of others as they express themselves to you. Intergroup dialogue about race, specifically addressing the false perceptions of outgroups, decreases levels of intergroup anxiety, unless the groups do not perceive the other as honest and trustworthy (Stephan and Stephan, 2000). Obviously honesty and trust are keys to successful intergroup relationships.

Know and Understand Your Prejudices

Confronting one's own flaws and misperceptions is one of the most difficult tasks to do. Understanding why and how you make judgments about members of the outgroup is vital to a successful breakdown of threat. Coming into my experience I was exposed to racial assumptions and biases within myself that I had never noticed before. Coming to grips with those assumptions that I held was key to my success at overcoming them. In order for teachers to succeed in multicultural education classrooms, teachers must develop a strong awareness to their own racial and ethnic biases as well as ways to counteract them (Banks, 1989).

Seek to Know Each Outgroup Member as an Individual

The tendency, when you identify others, is to find the most obvious characteristic about them, and to place them in that category. This is especially evident with regard to race as our tendency is to identify the most obvious characteristic about an outgroup member, which is most often race. But, you would not make this identify another member

of your ingroup by their race. Next time you interact with someone of a different race, attempt to learn about he/she as an individual, and characterize or categorize him/her by something other than his/her race. Negative stereotypes develop swiftly as we naturally categorize the behavior of others as normal for all people with similar traits, characteristics and backgrounds (Stephan and Stephan, 2000). Resist this urge to classify others by these characteristics and treat them as an individual.

Reflect, Reflect, Reflect

Understand when, how and why you feel the way you do about other people, particularly when they are not of your racial origin. Upon reflection you may enable yourself to understand your assumptions, prejudices, and fears of outgroup members. Once you have identified those, you can challenge them through interactions with members of that group. Then, follow that up with a post-interaction reflection to understand what you have learned, experienced, and what changes it has made to your sphere of reference of race. Personal reflection is a less tangible method to counter ignorance than intergroup dialogue, but is just as valuable and important in its outcome.

Resist Urge to Expect or Assume

Everyone is an individual, distinctly unique from any other. Respect that and resist the urge to categorize and stereotype others. With a clean slate, you enable yourself to experience the interaction with an outgroup member as they want you to. Often you will find the same opportunity will be granted in return.

Recognize Existence of Race

Race is an important part of an individual's identity, and living in a manner of "colorblindness" takes away another individuals right to have race as an important part of

our identity. In fact colorblindness is detrimental to integration of races in our society today and perpetuates racial discrimination by hiding improper treatment of certain marginalized racial groups (Closson & Henry, 2008).

Talk About Race, Expressing Your Apprehensions

Last, but certainly not least, do not be afraid to express your apprehensions to others, both members of your own ingroup and members of outgroups. One of the best choices I made throughout my time at De La Salle was to express my apprehension both to students individually, and to Mrs. A, that I was nervous when I first entered the classroom. This may be particularly beneficial for those in my position because I expressed a discomfort and nervousness with expressing life as a minority, something that Mrs. A and the students in the classroom could relate to. Intergroup dialogue about race has achieved success in a number of settings in research. Snyder et al (2008) provide a very powerful framework for approaching racial dialogue between racial groups, focusing primarily on simply raising awareness for ingroups of outgroup attitudes, perspectives, and experiences. Intergroup dialogue about race should involve a discussion about the apprehensions that exist when talking about them.

Conclusions

Experiencing race and communicating across racial barriers is a very powerful and beneficial experience to undergo. Racial threats described in Integrated Threat Theory are prevalent in society today, but there are systems and ideas that can help counteract them. Programs like multicultural education should be implemented in all education programs, emphasizing the need for racial equality and understanding. Intergroup contact/dialogue is also effective at breaking down realistic and symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and

negative stereotypes. I was provided several experiences and views of racial barriers, both in the classroom and through interviews. My experience in the classroom was very valuable, shedding light on my own experience of race, an experience that I hope, translates into positive experiences for others working to break down their own and society's racial barriers.

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