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Why Should All School Leaders Address Racism?

By Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers on October 24, 2017 7:39 AM | No comments

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In May, on the eve of NBA Playoffs, LeBron James' home was defaced with racial slurs. One of basketball's super stars, who brings excitement to the game and to basketball fans of all ages, had the 'N-word' spray painted at his home, where he, his wife, and children all live. Sure, it was months ago and news lasts these days only hours, not months. But, we recently ran across a video (no longer available) from that time and it triggered our decision that it was still newsworthy and action worthy. Part of [LeBron's response](#) was, "I look at it as, if this is to shed the light and keep the conversation going, then on my behalf, I'm OK with it."

As educators, we have a responsibility to 'keep the conversation going' in all ways. It isn't a conversation limited to those schools and communities with a large minority population. In fact, the conversation may be even more important in schools where the minority population is small. Our history with slavery laid the foundation for racism. That racism came from the white population, didn't it? So even in all white schools, race and racism need to be examined. The action of some NFL players, starting with Colin Kaepernick, to 'take a knee' has given rise to a hotly contested and poorly articulated argument between those in support and those who oppose that action.

It took some answer seeking for us to untangle some of the explanations that could be helpful. Before all this controversy, taking a knee in football was part of the sport. [SportsLingo.com](#) explains taking a knee in football...

...refers to when the [quarterback](#) snaps the ball and immediately takes a knee behind the center in order to [run out the clock](#). By taking a knee, it automatically ends the play forcing the other team to take a timeout, if they have any left, in order to stop the clock.

A September [New York Times Article](#) explains...

In youth sports, players take a knee when another player is hurt. It is an acknowledgment of the vulnerable humanity that, for the moment, has been obscured by the intense competition of the game. Taking a knee in that context is, like a religious genuflection, a gesture of self-surrender before the greater reality of human suffering.

Likewise, when black players take a knee during the national anthem to protest police violence against African-Americans, they are making a gesture of pain and distress. They are putting America in a more honest context -- our "Star-Spangled Banner" dimly seen through the mists of deep injury. It is like flying an American flag upside down in a moment of emergency.

We think there is an opportunity for all of us, particularly educators, to try to make sense of this thing called race and racism. Let's not let it slip away because it has fallen off of the news cycles.

What is Race?

Agustin Fuentes is trained in Zoology and Anthropology, and is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame. His research delves into the how and why of being human. He authored an article in [PsychologyToday.com](#) entitled "Race Is Real, But Not in the Way Many People Think" in which he wrote:

There is currently one biological race in our species: *Homo sapiens sapiens*. However, that does not mean that what we call "races" (our society's way of dividing people up) don't exist. Societies, like the USA, construct racial classifications, not as units of biology, but as ways to lump together groups of people with varying historical, linguistic, ethnic, religious, or other backgrounds. These categories are not static, they change over time as societies grow and diversify and alter their social, political and historical make-ups.

The definition of who we are is often a combination of what "I believe" and "Who I have come to be because of the life experiences or origins of my ancestors." Defining and describing is part of shaping our personal identity for others to understand but like much else, naming becomes a way of categorizing, which then results in separation.

The Role of School Leadership

When we talk about educating ALL students, our calling is to include the brilliant and the disabled, the rich and the poor, the global citizen and those who remain rooted in the community of origin. Sometimes we have difficulties having conversations about these groups as well. But anecdotal data reveal that it is almost treacherous to open a conversation about race. Before working to change that, we are called to question our beliefs about race. What is it? What do we believe about it? How does it affect how we, school leaders, think and feel? How does our mindset about race affect the children in our schools? Schools operate as the training ground for democracy, preparing graduates ready to take a 21st century role as citizens. Do we lead schools where we can look at ourselves and recognize any vestiges of racism that live within us?

A recent trip to Memphis allowed a visit the National Civil Rights Museum. It is at the site of the Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King was assassinated. The journey through the museum is a journey through the racial history of this country from the perspective of black America. It was a shocking and a familiar story if one experience can simultaneously hold both. Every one of the exhibits was so powerful and caused us to think about walking in someone else's shoes. In a wall sized photograph of the 1963 March on Washington, there was a small boy in a scout uniform. His arms were crossed on his chest. He sat on a man's lap. His face was unforgettable. He would be our age now if he is still alive. Our painful racial days are not ancient history. They are our lifetime and they are still unfolding. If we are courageous enough and if we want to make a difference, perhaps we can help the wounds heal and respect grow. We hope so.

Ann Myers and Jill Berkowicz are the authors of [The STEM Shift \(2015, Corwin\)](#) a book about leading the shift into 21st century schools. Ann and Jill welcome connecting through [Twitter](#) & [Email](#).

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