

AVOIDING THE UNAVOIDABLE: RACE AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION

On July 7, 2020, **Terence Fitzgerald**, clinical associate professor and **Ruth C. White**, clinical associate professor, hosted an interactive webinar discussing the current mechanism of racialized oppression in U.S. education. Below are additional answer to questions submitted during the webinar that were unable to be addressed during the live session.

1. **Is there a move by Education Secretary DeVos to make public schools share funding with private schools during this pandemic?**

TF: Anything is possible under this administration. From the beginning of her tenure, DeVos has wanted this to occur. The virus is giving her an excuse to push this faulty and inequitable agenda.

2. **If so, does this mean that private schools that receive federal funding will need to NOW comply with IDEA, Title X, and other federal laws to protect children from discrimination?**

TF: That is the question. But I do not think this will occur due to this fact alone. In addition, I feel Congress would block this from occurring. If Trump is re-elected and Congress is republican lead, it most definitely will occur and a Supreme Court challenge will follow.

3. **Which agency monitors compliance?**

TF: The Department of Education

4. **Please describe the current situation and what is coming down the pipes right now? Forecast?**

TF: This is very hard to determine due to the upcoming election. All I can say is that if Trump is re-elected, I feel DeVos and her agenda will pass through.

5. **Media appears to highlight school shootings in white communities such as Columbine, Sandy Hook, etc. at higher rates than communities of color. Do these schools have the same presence of police force? If not, what is there reasoning behind enforcing these forces in communities not highlighted in the media?**

TF: Schools generally have the same amount of presence if they have a resource officer. The question is, do they treat the children the same in predominately children of color schools vs. a Columbine type school. Within communities that are not spotlighted in the media, schools argue they need resource officers due to the danger the students possess to one another.

RW: Well, 'resource officers' tend not to be utilized in schools in upper middle class neighborhoods so in this way, schools that have predominantly white neighborhoods are less likely to have a 'resource officer,' never mind a police officer. Perceptions of danger are racialized and are also associated with poverty and so students of color are much more likely to interact with police officers in a school setting.

6. Can you speak to the curriculum used in public schools and the unconscious effects of oppression it creates and how we can help change this? Are there any steps you recommend? Specifically talking about the high school level.

TF: I recommend culturally responsive textbooks. There are books that schools can elect to use that are historically accurate and culturally responsive. I feel that a lot of curriculum and textbooks are done without a diverse voice at the table. It is not simply about race. Textbooks should include oppression of other historically marginalized groups as well.

RW: In my experience as a mother of a child who went to a public high school, images of blackness are relegated to conversations of slavery and Black History Month topics. So in the absence of mainstreamed positive images, African-American students are not likely to normalize their role in history beyond being oppressed and the civil rights movement.

7. What would you say to a person who says that Democrats are racist because they put forth the idea that minorities cannot compete with whites? Essentially, how do you educate or communicate with someone who does not “believe” in institutional racism?

TF: I feel that facts would not complete the task. One could point to recent housing data that illustrates racial discrimination. One could talk about schools and funding. One could even talk about the criminal justice system and unequal treatment. But in the end, many people do not want to face a fact that essentially describes them as patsies or cogs within a machine that has historically targeted people of color. They do not want to face said fact because it challenges their identity and participation in the ideal of democracy.

RW: First, I would argue that this is not a democratic message. Second, like Terrence states, people who don't 'believe' in institutional racism are basically deniers of history – from the Constitution to present-day inequities. A simple statement is not going to change their mind so I would recommend books or articles for them to read.

8. Dr. Fitzgerald, what is the title of the book you mentioned near the end of your lecture?

TF: Joe Feagin, Racist America

9. What can we do as social workers and parents to change the status quo?

TF: Constantly challenge inequality and oppression. Challenge it within a micro and macro context. In addition, continue to practice cultural humility.

RW: First, educate yourself about the history of America with regard to its relationships with Black people and other people of color. Second, understand that the research on which a lot of social work theory is based is culturally bound. So it is inherent on us as social workers to question our beliefs, values and assumptions with regard to inequality, racism and oppression, and to challenge them in our practice. We have to take a critical lens to our practice to make sure that we do not reinforce systems and practices of oppression and challenge racism wherever we see it.

10. Can the racial dynamic in classes work both ways? I am a Black male and within my undergraduate sociology classes I would often times be the only Black male in majority of my classes. It fueled me to surpass my colleagues and learn more about why Black males are underrepresented in the social work field. Can you please provide feedback?

RW: Yes, we are often motivated by our own experience to explore our positionality, and to question the 'whys' of our reality. Being 'the only' often makes people feel like they must 'represent' on behalf of their racial/cultural/ethnic group so that they provide an 'alternative' narrative to people's perceptions of their abilities.

11. Do you have recommendations for how staff can best support students of color at a primarily white school?

RW: Depending on your role, it is important to ask students of color what they need to support their pursuit of excellence. You can also research successful programs at other places and see how to replicate them wherever you are. Lastly, if you realize that there are policies that have a disproportionate impact on students of color, then challenge them and rewrite them.

12. Dr. White, I see so much of what you speak as a therapist at a university counseling center. How can I support and empower my BIPOC students beyond the extensive case management and collaboration with other campus supportive services that I'm already doing?

RW: I think creating, marketing and supporting safe spaces for BIPOC students to support each other in their pursuit of academic excellence helps students create community and helps them collectively find solutions for the issues that they face.

13. Do you have any ideas of things we can do at a local level, specifically starting with elementary public schools, on how to combat racial disparity in education?

TF: Show up at board meetings. Challenge policies and procedures that negatively affect the invisible among us. Gather others who feel as you do and create a power structure that challenges oppression. Be a part of meetings and curriculum. Be a part of the conversation regarding teachers and hiring practices. Advocate for more teachers that look like the students that attend the schools.

RW: Vote in school district elections for people that are intentional about eliminating the racial inequities in education, including funding. Engage with the school district as well as individual schools and challenge policies and curriculum that directly or indirectly oppress students and their families. Speak up for students and families who, for various reasons, have less presence and power in the educational system. Advocate for curriculum that is reflective of the people who live in America and specifically the district. Advocate for hiring teachers that speak the languages and reflect the culture of the school and the district. And for curriculum that reflect the same. Advocate for equitable resources within school districts.

14. What are your thoughts about expanding resources towards colleges catered to specific ethnicities such as HBCUs (historical black colleges and university) which can help to close the education gap and provide a cultural safe space for students?

RW: These schools should get equitable resources from government sources. There should be more scholarship resources for students of color to compensate for the economic imbalances that result in African-American students having to borrow more money for college.

15. Can you speak to how intersectional identities impact equity (i.e. being a trans, black woman)?

TF: It adds another layer of oppression. It also can have others who are oppressed becoming the oppressors to a population that they deem as “other.”

RW: Intersectional identities ‘complicate’ the notion of equity. The issue is that we are all more than ‘one’ thing. And so the concept of equity becomes rooted in equitable systems and policies that reduce the impact of difference.

16. How can we, as individuals within the field, begin to make a tangible or impactful difference?

RW: Be brave in challenging systems. Be humble and learn as much as can about the impact of race on the lives of Americans. And be dedicated to the idea of equity and social justice.

17. As a school social worker, how can we implement these resources and educating our students in an elementary/middle school setting that attending a University is possible and there are resources?

RW: Collaborate with your school advisors and guidance counselors to create programs that support first generation students in understanding the path to college.

18. What role/impact does the school guidance counselor play in these disparities, and what can be done to make their work more impactful for students?

TF: They play a big role. They are gatekeepers of information and opportunities. They can help facilitate a child’s movement to a gifted class or they can shut down the conversation. Their power must be checked.

RW: Guidance counselors can inspire big dreams or squash even small ones. They need to help students explore who they are and provide information and resources to support students being the best that they can be. And their perception of ‘the best’ needs to be expansive.

19. How can we facilitate upper level administration in accepting the necessity to address/engage with conflict and tension in the community and in the room so that professors can use these moments in vitro?

RW: Advocacy.

20. In private schools with a historical background rooted as SPWI how do we engage in a changing dialogue?

RW: I am not sure what SPWI is. But if it is about a predominantly white institution then they need to start with a commitment to having difficult conversations in which people learn about racism and commit to change.