Chapter 6 An Intervention in Progress: Pursuing Precision in School Race Talk

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This chapter discusses an intervention in progress. What I am working to improve is not typically measured or classically “measurable.” Unlike other contributors to this book, I am not trying to make an explicitly quantifiable intervention, for example, to assist high school students to take fewer drugs. Rather, I am trying to assist educators to talk and think more precisely about the complex issues of race they face in their own institutions. This intervention attempts to counter a damaging habit I have studied: in educational settings (as elsewhere), we often talk about racial issues reductively, quickly, and with insufficient information. Equally destructive, we also often refuse to talk about racial issues at all (Pollock, 2004a).

In a 3-year ethnographic study of a school and district in California, reported in Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School (Pollock, 2004a), I found that refusing to talk about race, which I call “colormuteness,” can have harmful consequences in schools. For example, when educators just talk about “low achievers,” racial achievement gaps often stay unaddressed. When educators just talk about “the kids getting suspended,” racially disparate suspension patterns often continue unabated. Educators’ lives are made far more difficult when solutions remain unexplored. Yet conversations about race often display confused, murky, and partially informed thinking about racial inequality and racial disparities in education. This imprecise talk too is very consequential: when educators talk imprecisely about how disparities might be dismantled, they pursue this goal imprecisely as well. For example, my research suggests that people who analyze black students’ disproportionately low test scores as simply a result of “black culture” or analyze Latino dropout rates as a result solely of Latino parenting will be less likely to seek to improve their teaching of black or Latino students, or to improve the in-school experiences of such youth (see also Diamond, 2008; Louie, 2008). In my second ethnographic analysis of contemporary arguments over racial inequality in schools (Pollock, 2008a), I found once more that educators who were resistant to discussing the role their own behaviors played in student outcomes were less likely to set forth to improve students’ in-school experiences.

For the past several years, I have been using my research on race talk to help both preservice and inservice educators (teachers, principals, and superintendents) analyze how they currently talk and do not talk about race issues in their schools and districts. We do what linguists call “metapragmatic” analysis: we talk about our own talking, and its consequences for students and school communities.

Educators in schools and districts talk about racial issues all the time, if often only in private. More privately, as I found in Colormute, they discuss how white teachers and students of color get along, which students get which opportunities, where various “racial groups” of students sit at lunch, and so forth. Particularly, in private, they discuss racial patterns in who is being suspended or put in Special Education, the purported “attitudes” of various “culture” groups toward schooling, and so on. Increasingly publicly in the era of No Child Left Behind, they discuss things like “achievement gaps”: for example, how various racial and ethnic groups are achieving on tests and on school-based measures of achievement such as grades and graduation.

Why intervene into such race talk? Because the ways in which educators talk about race issues in their schooling settings have major implications for how they analyze and address core issues of racial inequality there. Talking is an action that both reflects people’s thinking on social problems and produces (or does not produce) further action to address those problems. Many scholars have proved that though everyday talk in social settings, people inside schools make crucial decisions about whom to serve and how.1 Other scholars who study social problem solving have demonstrated that if a community wants to improve its own circumstances, it has to talk about its own social problems and analyze both causes and solutions precisely. For example, Hart (1997) demonstrates that children trying to solve environmental problems must precisely analyze those problems’ production; Fine, Roberts, and Torre (2004) show the same for youth in New York researching local and national racial “opportunity gaps.” So do Carlson and Earls (2002) trying to work with youth to analyze and address community problems in the United States and internationally. Kegan and Lahey (2002) show the same for adult professionals busy trying to improve their own social settings: “how we talk affects the way we work.” Problem analysis involves talking. When people work to solve dilemmas, tensions, and inequities in their own social settings, they must seek to discuss and analyze those issues precisely and thoroughly. Hence, I work with preservice and inservice educators to think through how they talk (and do not talk) precisely about racial issues in their institutions. I define precise race talk as talk that thoroughly and clearly analyzes the various actors, actions, and processes involved in the issue under discussion. In school settings, this includes talk that clearly discusses what specific subpopulations of students need from schools in order to succeed, talk that thoroughly and clearly analyzes the actors and acts that produce a racial disparity, and talk that clearly discusses which everyday acts by educators move students (particularly students of
color) toward educational opportunity and which acts move them further away from it.

**Theories of Measurement and Change**

Many well-known professional developers trying to prepare educators to engage issues of diversity urge educators to talk more about race in order to strive for racial equality of opportunity and outcome (Singleton & Hays, 2008). I, too, urge educators to avoid colormuteness whenever refusing to talk about race will be harmful to students. Yet in my interventions to try to make race talk in education more precise, I am urging (as does Singleton) that educators talk not just more about race but also more skillfully.

Researchers examining educators’ “race talk” often imply that they measure educators’ comments about race as more or less “racist.” I instead “measure” race talk on a scale from reductive to thorough and from murky to clear. I measure precise race talk in contrast to race talk that is too vague or confused to afford thorough analysis of educational problems. In my professional development efforts with educators, I suggest three racial topics that educators can typically discuss more precisely:

1. Educators can pursue more precise talk about **student subpopulations and their needs**.
2. Educators can pursue more precise talk about the **causes of racial disparities**.
3. Educators can pursue more precise talk about the everyday educator acts that actually assist students of color and those that actually harm them.

In describing typical talk about each topic below, I offer a set of questions and, in two cases, a graphic tool designed to get speakers to think metapragmatically about whether their own race talk is precise enough.

Let me state clearly that my goal in this work is not to prompt paranoia or what critics call a “politically correct” institutional environment that actually keeps people from talking about race issues out of fear that they will sound “racist” (Ely, Meyerson, & Davidson, 2006). Rather, I urge that educators struggle toward precise analysis of shared social problems, through discussions that are inherently difficult. Thus far, I have not literally assessed “how well” educators have done in these conversations; rather, I have asked participants to attend to the snags and dilemmas encountered as they attempt to talk about racial issues. Most of all, I prompt educators to consider whether their own conversations are assisting them to serve their students’ needs. This intervention assumes that educators are motivated generally to help children and that to some extent they will be motivated to make their discussions more precise once they recognize how imprecise talk makes it difficult to analyze and meet children’s needs.

This theory of change also assumes that to some extent, educators are motivated to better serve their students of color, typically on the receiving end of racial disparities, and to close racial “achievement gaps.” Some are motivated directly by desires to not be racist and to do a better job of educating youth from diverse backgrounds and some are motivated more indirectly by federal and state requirements to measure the achievement of racialized groups. Some just want to be more successful teachers and administrators. Most educators, like most Americans, subscribe generally to an ideology of equal opportunity (Hochschild & Herk, 1990). A subset of educators seem to lack motivation to offer students of color additional opportunities in specific circumstances; depending on how demands for opportunity proceed, educators can sometimes angrily denounce demands to assist students of color in particular ways (Pollock, 2008a). But educators often lack motivation to serve students of color equitably, but a clear analysis of how to do so (Harding, 2006; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Watson, 2007). One might argue that my tools for more successful “race talk” offer skills that are useful only to those motivated to talk more precisely or successfully. But some participants also become more motivated by the understandings that an analysis of their discourse produces. After seeing that insufficient explanations of achievement gaps lead to insufficient efforts to close those gaps, for example, educators have much more desire to pay attention to their race talk.

**Three Arenas in Which Race Talk in Schools Must Typically Become More Precise in Order to Thoroughly Analyze Issues of Race and Racial Inequality**

**Educators Can Pursue More Precise Talk About Student Needs**

Educators trying to describe the needs of students of color in school buildings often retreat to using general, race-loaded words like “urban,” “inner city,” “disadvantaged,” or “at-risk” when analysis gets too controversial or too complex. Such aggregated words often serve to gloss over the actual needs of student populations and subpopulations. These words do
often describe what Cicourel (1981) calls "macrostructures": "urban" students do often live in cities, after all. (Of course, the race-loaded, imprecise nature of the word "urban" is revealed when adults call suburban or even rural students of color "urban," especially if they wear attire associated with hip-hop culture.) General words like "urban" and the like do not actually describe what particular students actually need from social settings in order to succeed in them.

Talk that describes the needs of "all students" might be called "hyperaggregated." Such talk often dominates educator and policymaker discourse (in the district I studied in Colormute, "all students can learn" was a mantra repeated on mission statements and in administrator conversations). Talk of "all students" needs can also sometimes be accurate: all students do need attention, care, and support from their teachers. But often, as shown in my research (Pollock, 2004a), such hyperaggregated talk of student needs actually substitutes for any discussion of specific subpopulations' needs, as people talk only about "all students" rather than the needs of smaller groups of them.

Indeed, using such aggregated or hyperaggregated terms can actually prevent precise needs analysis. For example, general talk about "needy" students in school settings can supplant discussion of the needs of specific subpopulations, such as English language learners (see also Olsen, 1995). General aggregated talk about a district or school's population as "at-risk" or "disadvantaged" can also gloss over talk about the specific risks or disadvantages that some students experience in their actual lives. While a school community might quickly be described in the aggregate as "low income," for example, some students may actually be living in stable housing, while some may be living in foster care and some might actually be homeless. Some students will have employed parents or guardians and some will not. These differences will affect what assistance students need to succeed in school. Some talk of student needs will need to consider the needs of individuals, some of subgroups, and so on. Individuals always have individual needs, but subpopulations also sometimes have shared needs.

The answer in some cases is to talk about racial groups' needs. Some needs might be shared, on average, by members of a particular racialized group: on average, one school's Latino students might live in one area that lacks a community center open after school, while another school's black students on average might lack access to preschool. Similarly, some life experiences might be shared by a racial group at a school: a program for "Latinos" at one school might be useful to many of its Latino students if it affords them a safe space to analyze a shared experience of being "Latino" at the school, in the city, or in the United States (Gándara, 2008).

Yet other overarching claims about "Latino" needs might be too imprecise to serve a school's smaller subpopulations (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). A school's Salvadoran students, on average, might need particular psychological supports to weather families' experiences of political violence; Brazilian immigrants may require a particular set of language supports. Urban Chinese immigrant students' math preparation may far outweigh that of Hmong students coming from rural areas, making talk of "Asians" and their needs too imprecise (Wang & Wu, 1996). The particular needs and circumstances of recent Filipino immigrants in a school may never be discussed in a conversation about "Asians," or even a conversation about "Filipinos."

In order to serve student needs precisely, educators must describe and analyze student needs precisely. The educator thus needs to ask, repeatedly, whether discussions are pinpointing in sufficient detail which students need what from the school. One superintendent I met in a professional development setting spoke importantly of needing to provide a "smorgasboard" of programs designed to meet the various needs of various subpopulations and of the student population as a whole.

When discussing student needs, educators can draw a "number line" (that follows this paragraph) and ask the following questions about their ongoing conversation. Which needs are shared by subgroups, larger groups, or all our students? Where on this spectrum does our current talk about the needs of students fall? Are we describing student needs precisely enough?

Individual students ↔ subgroups ↔ larger groups ↔ all students

Educators Can Pursue More Precise Talk About the Causes of Racial Disparities

In school settings, educators routinely try to analyze the causes of the racial disparities and patterns they see around them. Imprecise race talk is talk that analyzes such causation only partially. For example, teachers I analyzed in Colormute often remarked privately that the student population wandering in the hallways during class was disproportionately black. They then explained this disparity only partially, in part by proposing assumptions as facts: they would explain that the pattern was caused by black students' "attitudes," or black parents' "values," or, less frequently, by the administrators or security guards who did not stop black students from wandering.

In this partial and imprecise analysis, speakers failed to pinpoint other acts and actors contributing to the pattern's production. They rarely noted that they themselves were often ejecting black students disproportionately from their classes into the hallways. They rarely asked whether black students might be disproportionately disengaged from particular teachers' classes and thus disproportionately wandering the
halls. They also rarely noted that nonblack students tended to stay home from school altogether when they wanted to cut class. Black students seemed to stay in the school hallways when cutting class as a visible protest of their situation, suggesting that different groups of students might be disengaging in different manners. In discussing only partially what “caused” the hallways’ demographics, educators missed a chance to fully understand and improve their own interactions with black students.

Any precise analysis of a racial disparity needs to go beyond quick statements about one isolated group of people producing the disparity and instead thoroughly analyze the various people and acts involved in producing the racial disparity. (Precise analysis also has to go beyond simply stating a disturbing pattern. The teacher simply remarking upon black students’ overrepresentation in the hallways may well clue in her peers to notice the pattern, but she will not provide them with any tools for figuring out how to dismantle it.)

The same thing can be said about educators’ analyses of “achievement gaps,” which, like many public explanations, often boil down the analysis to incredibly reductive causal statements. Educators are increasingly asked to explain racial achievement patterns publicly in the era of No Child Left Behind, since they now have to analyze the achievement data of racial and ethnic subgroups in their schools (see Losen, 2004). Such causal analysis can often become dangerously reductive. For example, a common too-quick explanation analyzed in research (Carter, 2005) is that black and Latino students simply refuse to achieve for fear of alienating their same-race peers. Such quick causal claims attributing achievement outcomes to peer interactions alone remove all sorts of contributing actors and actions from the analysis. Speakers fail to analyze, for example, educators’ role in tracking many young black and Latino students to low-“ability” groups (see Tyson, 2008), or even the role of educators’ instruction (Ferguson, 2008; Rubin, 2008; Weinstein, this volume, chapter 5). They fail to analyze how parents may lack knowledge of available educational opportunities (Mickelson & Cousins, 2008). They fail to analyze the complex “outside” opportunity systems denying children of color key early opportunities to learn or to be healthy (Noguera, 2003; see Rothstein, 2004), and so forth.

Educators trying to analyze racial achievement patterns are analyzing one of the most complex social problems in the nation. They need to be very careful about too-quick or too-shallow causal analyses that only scratch the surface of the problem’s complexity. The “achievement gap”’s causation can never be boiled down to one set of actors’ actions. When educators talk as though it can, this imprecise analysis actually can harm both young people of color and themselves, since actors and actions that could help close the “achievement gap” are left out of both analysis and interventions.

Another way that educators reduce the analysis of racial achievement patterns is by arguing quickly that the presumed “cultures” of particular racialized/ethnic/national-origin groups “cause” their achievement. Imprecise talk about “culture” often particularly implicates racial-ethnic group parents as somehow single-handedly responsible for student achievement. Such imprecise talk fails to analyze how parents, in interaction with school people, neighborhood people, larger opportunity systems, and their children, play a role in producing children’s performance. For example, Louie (2004) shows that Chinese parents (routinely the subject of quick “cultural” statements about “valuing education”) do not directly “cause” their children’s achievement through “caring” about it. Rather, through a complex set of interactions with other parents, school enrollment systems, neighborhood services, educators, and their children, Chinese parents acquire and share knowledge about how to push their children through the school system toward college, and then push their children in ways received favorably by schools (see also Zhou, this volume, chapter 13). In imprecise “culture” talk, educators fail to analyze the many, many actors that influence how any young Chinese American person achieves, including the educators who presume Chinese American parents and students to be “model minorities” (Louie, 2004). No child lives in a “group” bubble only influenced by people just from her ethnic-racial “culture.” Children are raised by home adults, but those adults interact with educators and administrators in schools; children interact not just with their guardians and peers, but also with teachers and principals and security guards and neighbors and the media.

Imprecise analysis of the causation of any racial pattern misses drawing players into the solution. Educators can talk more skillfully about racial disparities by investigating how various players might help dismantle the racial disparity under discussion. Whenever talking about racial disparities, educators can ask: Are we considering and including all the actors who contribute to producing these disparities? Do we really have evidence for the contributions we’re naming? Who else needs to be pulled in to help dismantle these disparities?

The goal in such conversations is not to demonstrate which actors or acts contribute more but rather to fully analyze all of the acts that produce the disparity being considered. Educators must take great care to also include their own acts when analyzing the production of the disparity as the typical tendency is to delete oneself from the analysis (Diamond, 2008; Pollock, 2004a, 2008a). Further, to avoid an unproductive blame game, facilitators should explicitly point out that the goal is to analyze distributed responsibility for social problems (Stone et al., 2000). I have called this pursuing “an urgent language of communal responsibility” (Pollock, 2001).
Educators Can Pursue More Precise Talk About the Everyday Educator Acts that Actually Assist Students of Color and Those that Actually Harm Them

This final issue is extremely important. Much scholarship proposing ways to assist students of color in schools never takes the time to guide educators through the details of such attempts at equitable practice. Instead, scholarship offers educators shorthand, vague, and imprecise strategies (“celebrate diversity,” or don’t be “colorblind”) that never precisely pinpoint which specific acts are actually helpful and harmful to students of color in which situations and why.

Imprecise talk about helping students of color can actually backfire on equity efforts. For example, a teacher urged to use a film or book or poster about “other cultures” to “diversify” her curriculum can easily use such a text in ways that oversimplify, stereotype, or misportray the people portrayed (Abu El-Haj, 2008; Chadwick, 2008; Deyhle, 2008; McCarty, 2008; Sharma, 2008; Sleeter, 2008). Educators need to talk more precisely about which pedagogical strategies engage diversity thoroughly. Similarly, an educator urged vaguely to “connect to the community” can easily do so clumsily and promote more shallow visions of communities (such as a quick bus tour that rolls without stopping through a school’s most impoverished enrollment area, a tactic I myself have experienced). Rather, educators need to talk far more precisely about how to forge deeper connections with actual community members (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Wyman & Kashatok, 2008).

One key confusion makes our talk about helping and harming students of color imprecise. Educators must both treat students of color as complex individuals rather than racial group members and recognize their real experiences as racial group members in order to assist them, understand their experiences, and treat them equitably. For example, a teacher must consider her black students’ experiences as black students struggling, against stereotypes, to be seen as smart (Cohen, 2008; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003); at times, she must afford her Latino students the chance to analyze their experiences through a false “racial” lens (D. Carter, 2008; Lucas, 2008).

Educators need to ask a more precise question: which everyday acts by educators move specific students of color toward educational opportunity and which acts move them further away from it? To answer this question regarding any given act (e.g., a method of teaching a particular text; a way of talking to students about racial stereotypes; or a particular disciplinary practice), educators can draw a simple number line (that follows this paragraph) and ask one another: Do we think this act is moving specific students of color closer to educational opportunity or farther away from it? Why? What is our evidence?

Less educational opportunity ↔ more educational opportunity

This issue is so complex that I produced an edited volume, Everyday antiracism: Getting real about race in school (2008b), in which I asked 65 experts in race and education studies to each discuss precisely one concrete, research-based practice that an educator could employ in her typical day to counteract racial inequality of opportunity and outcome. It took work for the authors, too, to discuss their recommendations precisely. We were motivated by the idea that precise suggestions would best assist educators to equalize opportunity.

Conclusion

The point of pursuing precision in school race talk is to prompt more precise analysis of what assisting students to enjoy equal opportunity actually entails. When we talk imprecisely about this goal, we pursue it imprecisely in school settings as well. For this reason, improving talk is far more than “just talking.” Rather, it hones educators’ analyses of how to improve their service to students.

Notes


2. See the many research studies on teacher “racism” discussed in Hollins and Guzman (2005).

3. By “educators,” I primarily refer in this chapter to adults who work in K-12 schools and their surrounding districts, although I have argued elsewhere that researchers can also pursue more precise talk about race issues in education if we want to promote precise problem analysis (Pollock, 2008b). So can university professors and those running teacher and administrator education programs.

5. Debates over the causation of racial disparities obviously characterize educational research as well. One might say that research is often a battle over which actors in complex systems actually produce racial disparities or play more of a role in producing those disparities. Still, researchers ourselves often make reductive, overarching claims about what “causes” disparities and various school “problems,” rather than offering more precise analyses of causation. For a telling example of how such quick explanatory statements can coexist amidst complex debates over causation, see Farkas (2003).

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