

Sonya Douglass Horsford

When Race Enters the Room: Improving Leadership and Learning Through Racial Literacy

This article explains (a) why racial literacy—an understanding of the origins and function of race in US schools and society—is essential to the work of educational leaders, and (b) how educational leaders can improve their leadership through racial literacy. It introduces the concept of racial literacy as a first step to improving school leadership practices, to be followed by racial realism, racial reconstruction, and racial reconciliation in racially diverse school communities. The article concludes with recommendations and resources designed to advance the racial literacy of educational leaders and their teams as part of a broader commitment to inclusion and social justice in US schools.

Sonya Douglass Horsford is an associate professor of Education in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University.

Correspondence should be addressed to Sonya Douglass Horsford, College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, MS 4C2, Fairfax, VA 22030. E-mail: shorsfor@gmu.edu.

GIVEN US EDUCATION'S FOCUS on race in everything from student test scores to school assignment plans and district-level achievement gaps, *racial literacy*, or understanding what race is and how it functions in society, is increasingly important to the work of educational leaders. Whether to measure and increase racial diversity, assess the *at-riskness* of a school, or ensure legal protections for historically segregated or marginalized groups, the role of race in education continues to represent a complex relationship that those in the field must acknowledge and understand. Flawed conceptions of race can undermine not only leadership efforts to close gaps in student opportunity and achievement, but also exacerbate such inequalities, which continue to correspond heavily to race. In the field of education, as Ladson-Billings (2011) observed after decades of research on culturally relevant pedagogy, critical race theory in education, and education policy and practices, "race almost always enters the room." Indeed, this proverbial elephant in the room has been increasingly hard to ignore in a high-stakes accountability envi-

ronment that requires school leaders to report student achievement data by race alongside class, language, special education classification, and other indicators of difference.

This article explains (a) why an understanding of the origins and function of race in US schools and society is essential to the work of educational leaders, and (b) how educational leaders can improve their leadership through racial literacy (Guinier, 2004; Horsford, 2009, 2011; Twine, 2004). I begin by introducing the concept of racial literacy as a first step to improving school leadership practices, followed by a discussion of *racial realism*, *racial reconstruction*, and *racial reconciliation* in racially diverse school communities. More specifically, in this article, I put forth racial literacy and the multistep progression from racial literacy to racial reconciliation as a practical approach to improving school leadership practices and their implications for student learning in racially diverse school communities (Horsford, 2011). Although this article focuses specifically on the construct of race, it does not suggest that race is more important than other forms of difference in schools. In fact, it underscores the belief that educational leaders should examine race in context, in relation to other variables such as class and geography, and relative to existing distributions of power (Guinier, 2004). The article concludes with recommendations and resources designed to advance the racial literacy of educational leaders and their staffs as part of a broader commitment to inclusion and social justice in US schools.

Race and Educational Leadership

The desire for educational leaders, along with those who craft and implement education policy, to avoid issues of race is both pragmatic and problematic. Avoidance is pragmatic because race is a difficult topic that often results in misunderstandings depending on the racial standpoints, experiences, and perspectives represented. Nearly all individuals who have attended schools, lived, worked, or spent significant time in the United States possess a racialized worldview.

This racialized worldview shapes their beliefs and behaviors concerning race, and what it means in the United States to be Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, White or White Ethnic. While potentially avoiding the pitfalls of heated or painful discussions, failure to acknowledge and consider race in school contexts erects a different set of barriers that commonly result from colorblind approaches to addressing racial inequality and discrimination.

In the case of educational leadership in racially diverse contexts, if school leaders are blind to color (or age, or sex, or ability for that matter), they fail to see their students, parents and caregivers, teachers and staff members, and the communities they are responsible for leading and serving. Such colorblindness inhibits an education leader's ability to shape and sustain a school culture that draws strength from diverse backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, and concerns because it suggests that these differences do not exist or are too controversial to acknowledge and, thus, better left ignored (Rusch & Horsford, 2009; Tatum, 2007). At their worst, colorblind discourses in schools constrain constructive talk about race and racial equity and serve to justify efforts to avoid race-conscious conversations, policies, and practices altogether (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 29; Horsford, 2009, 2011; Rusch & Horsford, 2009). Surely, the fears of being labeled a *racist* or accused of *playing the race card* are common concerns, but can be mitigated through proper leadership training and preparation. According to Rusch and Horsford (2009), "There is mounting evidence that aspiring school heads who feel unprepared to talk about racial and cultural perspectives and differences, have limited ability to effectively lead in diverse social contexts" and that those who "lack opportunities during preparation to talk constructively about complex social issues are more likely to revert to 'deficit thinking'" in such school communities (p. 303).

Thus, race remains "the undiscussable" (Rusch & Horsford, 2009, p. 303) when, in fact, "aggressive, color-conscious efforts" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 22) are needed to dismantle

the reproduction of racial inequality and inequity in schools. And while race is not being discussed, it is almost always in the room—on every student registration application, school accountability report, school improvement plan, federal grant application, program evaluation, and a large share of education research and policy reports. In many ways, the pervasiveness of race reaffirms its role in schools, making it unlikely that an educational leader can even begin to close a racial achievement gap or address similar issues of racial equality or justice without having a clear understanding of what race is and how it operates daily in schools.

This uneven application of race in the study and practice of educational leadership (colorblind discourses and color-conscious policies) underscores the importance of not taking for granted the ways in which race overtly and quietly functions in US schools. In the next section, I present a multistep progression toward racial equality in education (Horsford, 2011a; Horsford & Grosland, 2013; see Table 1). It begins with *racial literacy*, or understanding what race is, how it works, and its relationship to inequality; followed by *racial realism*, which acknowledges the history, regularity, and reproduction of racism in educational institutions like schools. The next stage is *racial reconstruction*, a process whereby individuals and institutions move from deficit-laden thinking and stereotypes and ascribe new meanings to race; which is followed by *racial reconciliation*, the aspirational goal of healing and reaching common ground (not necessarily agreement) concerning matters of race and racial equality.

Racial Literacy in Education: Understanding Race and How It Functions in Schools

In its simplest terms, racial literacy in education is “the ability to understand what race is, why it is, and how it is used to reproduce inequality and oppression” (Horsford, 2011a, p. 95). To start, *race*, or what sociologists refer to as *social race*, is a social construction. It is not biologically or genetically determined, but rather

“socially imposed and hierarchical,” resulting in “an inequality built into the system” (Conley, 2003). Although people often confuse or conflate race and ethnicity, they are different in several ways. First, although one can have multiple ethnic affiliations (e.g., Irish, Italian, and Peruvian), race is principally unitary, meaning an individual can only belong to one racial group (Conley, 2003). Second, ethnicity is more closely linked to a geographic region, language, customs, and culture, as well as a matter of choice and group membership. Race, although it may correspond significantly to ethnicity and all that comes with it, is an affiliation that others frequently determine for an individual and often unbeknownst to her or him (Cheng, 2003). Third, and perhaps the most important distinction between race and ethnicity for the purposes of this discussion, are the ways in which dominant public and private institutions treat race versus ethnicity. As historian David Freund (2003) explained:

One could argue that they’re both illusory and imagined. But racial categories have had a much more concrete impact on peoples’ lives, because they’ve been used to discriminate and to distribute resources unequally and set up different standards for protection under law. Both public policy and private institutional and communal actions have created inequalities based on race. (para. 1)

These dissimilarities between race and ethnicity are particularly important for educational leaders to apprehend, bringing us to the significance of *racial literacy* in schools. According to Guinier (2004), to be racially literate is to understand that race is a byproduct of the “dynamic interplay among race, class, and geography” and that racially literate examinations of race reveal how “those most advantaged by the status quo have historically manipulated race to order social, economic, and political relations to their benefit” (p. 114). In sum, “racial literacy is contextual,” “emphasizes the relationship between race and power,” and although it “never loses sight of race, . . . It constantly interrogates the dynamic relationship among race, class, geography, gender, and other explanatory variables” (pp. 114–115).

Table 1
Multistep Progression From Racial Literacy to Racial Reconciliation (Horsford, 2011a)

Step 1: Racial literacy	Ability to understand what race is, why it is, and how it is used to reproduce inequality and oppression.
Step 2: Racial realism	Drawn from critical race theory’s focus on acknowledging the history, pervasiveness, and salience of race and racism in US society, including its schools, and the pitfalls associated with liberal education ideology, policy, and practices.
Step 3: Racial reconstruction	The process of ascribing new meaning to race in order to transform the ways we think about, and subsequently act on, our racial assumptions, attitudes, and biases.
Step 4: Racial reconciliation	Process that seeks to heal the soul wounds and damage that has been done in schools and society as it relates to race and racism.

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Within the context of schools, it is understanding that much of the educational inequality that exists, whether the Black/Latino–White/Asian achievement gap, overrepresentation of Black boys in special education, or inadequate funding of support for English language learners, is a result of both public policy and private actions that make privilege and success seemingly natural for some groups and oppression and failure the norm for others (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Conley, 2003; Guinier, 2004; Omi & Winant, 1986). To avoid and dismantle this type of deficit thinking toward historically marginalized students and communities, educational leaders must become well-grounded in the knowledge base concerning the historical relationship between race and education in the United States, perhaps even before attempting to confront or interrogate their own racial assumptions and biases. This includes becoming familiar with the following movements that have institutionalized racialized hierarchies and racial inequality in US schools over time such as:

- The American eugenics movement of the early 20th century, which sought to improve humankind through immigration, segregation, and sterilization policy (Public Broadcasting Service, 2003; Selden, 1999);

- The history, laws, and practices of school segregation by race (boarding schools for American Indians, schooling in relocation camps for Japanese Americans, separate-but-equal schools for Blacks, Chicanos, and other colored children);
- A 21st century racialized *achievement gap* discourse that reinforces high academic expectations for White and Asian students and low expectations for their Black and Latino peers (in the most general of terms).

Thus, this first step of racial literacy suggests that educational leaders become knowledgeable about the longstanding historical relationship between race and education in the United States and the history of discrimination toward students solely because of race. Prior to engaging in antiracist self-reflective work, or engaging faculty in antiracist training, it is important to be aware of this history and able to engage in racially literate analyses of their implications for student learning and inclusive education in the 21st century.

**Racial Realism in Education:
 Acknowledging Race and Racism
 in Schools**

Once educational leaders have begun developing a more nuanced understanding of what race

is, why it is, and how it functions in schools, it is important to acknowledge that race and the practice of racism, which Guinier (2004) defined as “the maintenance of, and acquiescence in, racialized hierarchies governing resource distribution” (p. 98), are not artifacts of the past, but rather very present realities that continue to determine who gets what. This acknowledgment is central to *racial realism*, the second stage of the progression from racial literacy to racial reconciliation (refer back to Table 1). Informed by critical race theory’s pragmatic worldview that racism is yet a normal part of American life, racial realists do not find racism shocking or aberrant, but rather things that one could expect and, thus, become more intentional about how they see, interpret, and address racial inequality and discriminatory attitudes and practices in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2011).

In fact, racism is easily identifiable in public education where schools located in middle-to-high-income areas famously receive more resources, experienced teachers, and political and community support than their low-income counterparts, which often struggle to recruit and maintain experienced teachers and secure adequate educational materials, facilities, and funding (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Although this example points to socioeconomic status and geographic location as key factors for school-level investment, it highlights the interplay between class, geography, and race when it comes to not only gaps in achievement, but in opportunity and resources. Within schools, this racialized resource distribution can impact everything from whether or not a student is placed in remedial or advanced placement courses to the development of culturally relevant parent engagement programs to which individuals are selected to work as teachers or administrators in the building. As Guinier (2004) observed:

Even when race is no longer explicitly coded by appearance or ancestry, the allocation of seats in a classroom, the use of buses to transport schoolchildren, or the hue of the dolls with which those children play, race is, and was, about the distribution of power. (p. 99)

Acknowledging the racialized power differentials that exist in schools is central to racial realism for educational leaders. Whether it is the power dynamic that exists along the color line between teachers and students, administrators and teachers, or educators and parents, educational leaders must remember that, sadly, racism is real and continues to interact with class and geography in ways that dominant institutions control to privilege certain groups over others.

The practice of counterstorytelling, also a feature of critical race theory, provides a useful tool for informing and guiding conversations about how race continues to unfairly disadvantage students, educators, and parents who represent historically marginalized groups. Grounded in the *voice-of-color thesis*, which assumes that “minority status . . . brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9), counterstories serve as “an important tool for dismantling prevailing notions of educational fairness and neutrality in educational policy, practice, and research” (Villenas, Deyhle, & Parker, 1999, p. 33). Although some scholars have chosen to appropriate the practice of counterstorytelling to illustrate dominant voices and experiences, its original intent and significance lie in the “explanatory power” of marginalized, not mainstream, perspectives as a way to reveal the ongoing and oppressive consequences of racism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 30; Lynn & Adams, 2002).

As such, educational leaders and their staffs can benefit greatly from reading, listening, and learning from the counterstories of a veteran Black schoolteacher in their community, a first-generation Asian American mother, a fifth-generation Latina college student, or a Native American school principal to better understand how they see the world, and if and how race plays a role in their daily lived experiences, educational philosophies, and interactions within powerful dominant institutions. The point, however, is not to generalize these stories or use them as composite narratives for an entire race of people. Nor, at this stage, is the point to engage in a courageous conversation, coconstruct a narrative, or present one’s own counterstory. That comes

later. The purpose of the racial realist stage is simply to acknowledge the pervasive role of race and racism in US society, and thus its schools, and how race operates both independently of and alongside class and geography in ways that are real and powerful in the lives of the majority of schoolchildren in America.

Racial Reconstruction in Education: Creating New Conceptions of Race in Schools

After racial literacy and racial realism comes what is arguably the most transformational stage on the journey to racial reconciliation, that is *racial reconstruction* (refer back to Table 1). When educational leaders begin to understand race and how it functions, and acknowledge that race and racism are not constructs of the past but very real tools that continue to reproduce present-day educational inequalities, these leaders can actively begin to disrupt the historic patterns of deficit thinking, segregation, and racial stereotypes that produce new manifestations of racial inequality, such as *the achievement gap*. In other words, racial reconstruction, as I have defined elsewhere, is “the process of ascribing new meaning to race in order to transform the ways we think about and subsequently, act on, our racial assumptions, attitudes, and biases” (Horsford, 2011a, p. 100). This is where the inward journey and difficult antiracist work begins and requires educational leaders to change—or reconstruct—both their thinking and actions concerning race.

For American school leaders, rebuilding or rethinking one’s racial assumptions requires a historical and critical understanding of the foundations of such racialized worldviews and practices in the United States. As Steven Selden (1999) observed in his very important book, *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics and Racism in America*, “In the early decades of the 20th century, the assumptions that race and heredity were central to human development and social progress were basic components of American social thought” (p. 1). Such assumptions, imported from Great Britain, guided the American Popular Eugenics Movement, which was supported by a

vast array of American intellectuals and sought to improve humankind through selective breeding, restrictive immigration policies, and segregation from those deemed “unfit” (Selden, 1999, p. 1). Concerning education, this political, social, and pseudo-scientific movement “made itself present in the school and college curriculum,” as well as gifted education and intelligence testing, and reflected a group of American thinkers who were “profoundly anxious when confronted with America’s increasing social diversity in the early 20th century” (p. 1).

Thus, the ways in which eugenics and biological determinism have informed US social policy (e.g., immigration, school segregation, tracking) and research-based educational practices (e.g., standardized tests as sufficient measures of ability and achievement) provide just one example of how racist belief systems and racism have perpetuated deficit thinking in contemporary educational contexts. By exploring the origins of these racially constructed norms and expectations through film viewings and discussions and book circles, and interrogating personally held assumptions about race through antiracist pedagogical and leadership training and cross-racial relationship-building, education leaders can aggressively work to create new conceptions of race that lead to high academic expectations for students of all races.

Racial Reconciliation in Education: Toward Racial Healing and Harmony in Schools

The fourth and final stage of this multistep progression toward racial equality in education is *racial reconciliation* (refer back to Table 1). As noted previously, the troubling relationship between race and educational inequality and injustice remains very real in 21st century schools. Despite its extensive history and countless attempts to name, examine, and interrogate race, this social construct continues to be a difficult, uncomfortable, oftentimes contentious topic to talk about, much less do something about (Rusch & Horsford, 2009; Singleton & Linton, 2005; Tatum, 2007). Although this is not new, it is crit-

ical for educational leaders to recognize not only how public and private institutions and actions reproduce racialized hierarchies and inequities, but also how personally painful and damaging a lack of racial awareness, literacy, or realism can be to the educational and professional experiences of students and educators of all colors.

Perhaps it is somewhat ironic that after emphasizing racial literacy and racial realism as necessary and pragmatic steps to engaging in the transformative practice of racial reconstruction, the journey ends on an idealistic note. *Racial reconciliation*, or healing the wounds inflicted and damage done in schools as a result of racial inequality and racism, takes a slight departure from the other stages' emphasis on the role of institutional practices and a step toward interpersonal interactions and self-reflection. Others cannot generate this healing and process of reconciliation. It can only come from within (Horsford, 2011b). Thus, the aim of racial reconciliation, much like the hope for a society free of war, poverty, and crime, serves as an idealistic end of a race-consciousness journey that may prove more aspirational than attainable, but through which schools could serve as sites of hope and possibility.

In education, the goal of racial reconciliation is reflected largely by my preferred definitions of the word *integration*, as opposed to the mixing of bodies by race, or *desegregation* (Horsford, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). Although often used interchangeably, integration reflects what legal scholar Charles Ogletree (2004) described as the means of "creating a new community founded on a new form of respect and tolerance" (p. 301). As I have noted elsewhere (see Horsford, 2011), Ogletree's characterization echoes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s definition of integration as "genuine, intergroup, interpersonal doing" and "the ultimate goal of our national community" (1962/1986, p. 118). In many ways, racial reconciliation reflects the doing, the healing, the perfecting through which people operationalize their racially literate, realist, and transformative selves. By continuously challenging their racial assumptions; engaging in courageous conversations about race (Singleton & Linton, 2005);

listening and learning from the counterstories of students, parents, and colleagues who represent differing racial worldviews; and reconstructing the meaning they attach to race in America, educators can work collectively to advance racial understanding and justice in schools and communities throughout the United States.

Concluding Thoughts

Educational leaders committed to improving the life chances of children through high expectations, rigorous instruction and curricula, and high-quality inclusive learning environments are no strangers to big and bold ideas. Success in identifying and implementing racially literate practices that translate dialogue into action prove to be difficult and will almost always face resistance (Theoharis, 2010), but is worth the fight. Through developing racial literacy and by reframing race in ways that challenge individual assumptions and biases and institutionalized school policies and practices, educational leaders can begin to work intentionally to *close the achievement gap*. Better still, they will consider such gaps within the historical context of racial exclusion, segregation, and discrimination, and their implications for leadership and learning when they enter the room.

Note

1. Although sociologist France Winddance Twine used this term in 2004 to describe how parents of mixed race children in the United Kingdom prepared them to identify, cope with, and counter racism and anti-Black attitudes and practices, its usage in this article is more closely aligned with critical race scholar Lani Guinier's (2004) conception.

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