

Who Speaks with Our Youth About Race and Racism?

By José Alfaro, LCSW (December 18, 2014)

Raising a Puerto Rican son in Washington Heights, NYC, I often wondered what to tell him about dealing with the police. Though today the Heights is an area undergoing rapid gentrification, during the 80's it was reputed to be a violent, drug infested community. As a community activist I was very leery of the police and my son's mother and I warned him that the police were not to be considered his friends. We gave him the usual warnings that parents often give Brown and Black children, especially the male child: when confronted by the police don't make a sudden movement, keep your hands in sight, don't run, and don't hang on the corner where the drug dealers are.

I wish that tensions had decreased, but today it seems that relations between communities of color and the police have grown more acerbic than ever. The killings of Eric Garner in Staten Island, NY, Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, Oscar Grant in Oakland, CA, and perhaps the most disturbing, 12-year old Tamir Rice in OH, as well as so many others have created a sustained rage throughout the U.S. as they are disseminated via social media. Sadly the challenge for parents of color remains the same today - how do we have the conversation with our children about the police without traumatizing them. But I don't think we can do it alone. I think we have to seek others to support our efforts to have these conversations with our youth?

I think these conversations should take place in religious institutions, social service agencies, community centers, unions, and just about anyplace that people congregate; however, as a parent and a retired social worker for the NYC Department of Education I feel that school personnel have a particular responsibility to have this conversation with all youth, particularly youth of color. Despite the many changes in the educational system (excessive testing, privatization, etc.) that can diminish the relation between students and teaching staff, students spend about a third of their day in school. While some teachers envision themselves as only responsible for covering academics, others realize that they can play an important role in providing the social emotional support that young people need to become adults. Dealing with issues of race and racism is such an integral aspect of the social emotional development of children that I believe that schools, in providing an education for life, must face these "difficult conversations."

At the same time I realize that there are many reasons that schools feel either inadequate to having the conversation and/or fear having the conversation. One obstacle is that in NYC, as in much of the U.S., the teaching staff has become

increasingly white as the numbers of teachers of color diminish. This often means having a non-person of color facilitating a conversation about race and racism with the students, a prospect that I believe that many parents of color are concerned about. I share these concerns, especially since I have had numerous conversations with teachers about these issues and unfortunately I've often been met with either silence, or comments like, I don't see color, it's too divisive, it's too emotional, I don't know how to have the conversation, I don't want to depress the students even more, and/or it's not my responsibility. At the same time I find that there are teachers, of all races and nationalities, whom, despite not having the experience of discussing race and racism in either their lives or their classes, rise to the challenge presented by the reality of their students' lives and have the "difficult conversation," as intimidating as it may be.

I think an important initial step in having this conversation is for teachers to carefully listen to what students and their families are saying. I have found that when we listen carefully we find that students are having the conversation without us, often with a mixture of anger, cynicism, and feelings of disempowerment. I also suspect that sometimes the trauma of these experiences, even if limited to vicarious trauma, can be reflected in a student's inappropriate behavior and academic difficulties.

I propose that throughout the nation that schools open their doors and welcome the communities they serve to begin consistently having these "difficult conversations." But these conversations take both will and skill. This means that schools must be provided with the financial resources to train staff, students, and community members so that these discussions while painful and challenging, can take place within a safe, empowering and hopeful space. As adults, our goal in these conversations is to sharpen our listening skills in order to deepen our understanding of the issues, and perhaps more importantly, help us develop an emotional grounding that will allow us to be present in the heat of the discussion. I think that in a society that avoids the race conversation this may be one of the most important educational campaigns for our school systems to embark upon.

When having these conversations with young people and with adults I utilize a restorative practice circle derived from indigenous cultures where people sat in circle discussing community issues. Today it's used in the legal system as a way of holding people accountable and in schools to build "caring communities." This approach has been found to be an effective way to reduce inappropriate behavior, reduce suspensions and break the "school to prison pipeline."

In a restorative circle the circle keeper passes a talking piece around and participants are encouraged to respond to the prompts of the circle keeper. It's a democratic process that encourages participants to develop a trust with one another so that they feel safe when having the more "difficult conversations." Safe enough to

respect and challenge one another, but at the same time uncomfortable, the kind of discomfort that occurs when difficult conversations happen and the scars of racism are exposed. Circles can be incredibly therapeutic and as a psychologist friend frequently reminds me, "you don't have to be a therapist to be therapeutic."

Can the school system meet the challenge of "opening the discussion?" Truthfully I'm not sure, in fact, I have doubts. But I've seen enough young people and adults trying out the conversation to believe that it's possible. Concurrently I believe that history has shown us that without the protests in the streets much of America would not even be considering having these difficult conversations.

As parents and as educators, when we are silent about difficult issues it says to our youth that these issues are either too difficult to discuss and/or not worthy of discussion. In a way it's a form of denying reality - the reality of youth of color - because when we say that school is for discussing important subjects, yet omit race and racism, it sends the message to our students that an issue consistently facing them doesn't merit the time that the traditional academic issues do. I think that's a dangerous message for adults to give to young minds.

José Alfaro, LCSW is a retired NYC public school teacher and school social worker who returns to schools as a member of Teachers Unite to help schools develop programs of restorative practice, including restorative justice, in an effort to create "caring communities," reduce suspensions and eliminate what is referred to as the "school to prison pipeline." He strongly encourage schools to consistently have "difficult conversations" about challenging topics. For more information please contact him at joalfaro49@aol.com and/or Teachers Unite at www.TeachersUnite.net/.