Joshua Frank, Massachusetts

When White Educators Discipline Students of Color

This article is an excerpt from an article tentatively scheduled to appear in an upcoming issue of Education Digest.

It discussing the achievement gap, educators...
A new school year can mean a fresh start, a chance for renewal with new students, new schedules and in some cases, new colleagues. In this issue, our colleagues invite us to reflect with them on ways to take our considerable, collaborative will and skill to a deeper level as we sharpen our focus on our mission, “to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools.”

In the Director’s Report, Steven Strull shares his reflection on his first year as our executive director, sharing his experiences and thinking about our next steps as we move toward a membership structure to sustain our work. Ellen Key Balkslock’s article introduces her research into the impact of our CFG work and offers some insights and reflective tools to help us strengthen the connection between our espoused goals and our actual effect on teaching and learning. In NSRF’s Living History, Peggy Silva talks with Greg Peters of Leadership High and the San Francisco Center about his journey as a reflective practitioner focused on equitable outcomes for students. Joshua Frank from Brookline shares his questions about the equity issues behind disciplinary decisions when these decisions are made after a racial difference. Maria Elena Rico reviews Principal Accomplishments: How School Leaders Succeed, calling it a “must read” for leaders who are willing to challenge their leadership assumptions.

Camilla Greene’s conversation with Dr. Paul Gorski invites us to think critically about issues of class and poverty and the underlying assumptions of Ruby Payne’s framework. In Protocols in Practice, Kim Feirke tackles issues of voice and privilege as she asks us to examine the ways our protocols can be used to silence some while empowering others. Lynda Robinson supports Kim’s analysis by sharing a candid reflection about her silencing as an African-American woman in a new coaches seminar.

From the National Center Chris Jones offers a summer roundup of seminars and institutes, while Sarah Childers paints a harrowing picture of the reality of anti-Muslim discrimination in our schools and the steps we can take to challenge these practices, as well as our own assumptions about Muslims, in our classrooms and communities.

The Courageous Conversations about Race book chat group shares quotes from our ongoing discussion and urges others to read the book and initiate a second tier of conversations, both electronically and in real time.

Finally, in Students at the Center, I offer a glimpse into the ways that we have missed opportunities to work successfully with students of color. As a practical matter, though, understanding these struggles has a potentially profound payoff for students of color, and for white educators. Educators, students, and parents who are comfortable communicating with each other, and believe that they are working together in a spirit of fairness and shared concern for children, have a much better chance of succeeding in working together to educate those children. We also have the opportunity then to be enriched by our differences, rather than confused or frustrated by the difficulties of our work together.

Feedback to students and families should be balanced between positive and negative, and presented within a long-term future perspective. If a student doesn’t respond to limits during class, for example, confront the misbehavior calmly and, whenever possible, privately. Avoid focusing on behavior that is not directly connected to achievement or the orderly functioning of the school. Avoid code words like “disrespect” or “attitude” which may communicate dislike to parents of color, and serve to cut off, instead of nurture, a working relationship. Instead, try to balance positive and negative feedback, always in the context of future development.

Given the burdens and challenges that students of color and their families carry in attending public schools, it may seem unfair to focus on understanding the struggles of a group of educators privileged by the color of their skin, and often unaware of the ways that they have missed opportunities to work with new students, new schedules and in some cases, new colleagues. In this issue, our colleagues invite us to reflect with them on ways to take our considerable, collaborative will and skill to a deeper level as we sharpen our focus on our mission, “to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools.”

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Connections is a journal of the National School Reform Faculty, a division of Harmony Education Center. Published three times per year, it provides a forum for CFG Coaches and other reflective educators to share their practice.

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