

CPHNEW News and Views

A semi-monthly column on emerging topics related to healthy workplaces

Issue #69: The Impact of Race-related Stress on Educators of Color

Contributed by Audrey Murph-Brown, EdD, Massachusetts Teacher's Association and Scott Fulmer, ScD, and Khafayat Kadiri, MPH, University of Massachusetts Lowell

Race-related Stress among Educators of Color (EOCs)

Racism is recognized as a social determinant of both physical and mental health effects, but it is not easily defined due to its different attributes related to beliefs and acts associated with the concept. Decuir-Gunby & Gunby (2016) discussed it as an integral, permanent, and indestructible part of today's society, ingrained in economic, social, and political institutions as well as individual belief systems. Despite public health knowledge that experiences of racism are an occupational and public health hazard, there is a need for more research to delineate pathways for health (Garcia & Sharif, 2015). Workplace race-related stress erodes joy and robs self-worth.

Challenges faced by Educators of Color (EOCs)

Although a growing body of literature has emerged about the strengths of Educators of Color (EOC), they are continuously marginalized within the profession. Based on the assets EOC bring to the education of students of color, recruiting diversity has become the goal of many teachers, education programs, and school districts. EOC represent about 5% of the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) membership, whereas people of color comprise 20% of Massachusetts residents, making EOC a particularly vulnerable workplace population.

Conversations on Race-related Stress with EOCs

In this study, focus group discussions were conducted among 25 educators of color in Massachusetts from three large school districts in Massachusetts: Worcester, Brookline, and Springfield. Participants consisted of African Americans, Hispanics/Latinos and Asian Americans. The focus group discussions aimed to examine EOCs' experience of race-related stress at their workplace, including coping mechanisms, and identify ways to improve their working conditions. Recruitment was made within MTA through a grassroots network of African-, Latin-, Asian-, and Native American (ALANA) educators, and conducted by people of color.

Study Findings

The participants expressed physical and psychological effects of race-related stress. Physical effects of stress included headaches, high blood pressure, and asthma. Psychological effects included depression, anxiety, anger, paranoia, insomnia, spirituality, hopelessness (fear of failing), and lack of trust. These two comments by focus group participants helped to illustrate these ideas: *"It gets to the point that I can't get out of bed. Depressed and panic attacks, I get nausea and get headaches"* and *"It is exhausting. I am careful with everything; it must be 110%; white people do only 70%. They do not think our kids are worth doing more."*

These effects have been identified as Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) (Quaye et al. 2019, Williams 2018). RBF diverts energy from the necessary and productive areas of life and points to health-related symptoms of RBF, including anxiety, gastrointestinal problems, and chronic pain (Grooms et al. 2021). The experience of racism was more than personal. Participants described how RBF was exacerbated by alienation of seeing racism systemically amplified in their relationships with students, families, and the educational system at large. They stated examples of *"Having to do*

all the roles to support students of color because nobody else steps up (and because there are no other teachers of color)” and “Feeling like I have to take on the issues [and] projects to bring diversity into classroom because the school fails to do it.” The participants also described feeling disturbed at seeing white parents perpetuate stereotyped views with their students, seeing administrators side with these parents rather than protect educators, and seeing students experiencing their own race-related stressors.

The participants identified four ways to alleviate race-related stress in the workplace. The four ways, which may overlap with each other, included increasing the number of EOCs, creating workplace policies that benefit EOCs, providing support groups in the workplace, and offering trainings on cultural awareness and racial issues. Accountability was one such policy expressed by a participant, who gave the examples of *“Holding administrators accountable. Having a chance to really confront and raise the realities, rather than them just transferring me out.”* One participant suggested a role for the teachers’ union for linking EOCs with mentors, suggesting *“Could the union help to identify mentors so we can talk to others when you are the only person of color in your role?”*

Future Research and Practice Implications

With a growing knowledge on identifying how to combat the issues of race related stress in the workplace, this study further supports the need for more research and introduction of new workplace practices. First, the need for diversity and cultural awareness training was highly emphasized by the participants. A follow up on new workplace interventions would be advisable to ensure the needs of EOCs are met. More EOCs need to be hired, but with culturally competent social support in their colleagues and administrators. Unions can use these findings to create protective language in local contracts and to establish support for community actions. Finally, it would be beneficial to also assess the needs of students of color as part of preventing the systemic alienation of race-related stress in education from taking root in a future generation.

References:

1. DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., & Gunby, N. W. (2016). Racial Microaggressions in the Workplace. *Urban Education*, 51(4), 390–414. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916628610>
2. Grooms, A. A., Mahatmya, D., & Johnson, E. T. (2021). The Retention of Educators of Color Amidst Institutionalized Racism. *Educational Policy*, 35(2), 180-212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904820986765>
3. Garcia, J. & Sharif, M. Z. (2015). Black Lives Matter: A Commentary on Racism and Public Health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 105(8), e27–e30. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2015.302706>
4. Quaye, S., Karikari, S. N., Allen, C. R., Okello, W., & Carter, K. D. (2019). Strategies for Practicing Self-Care from Racial Battle Fatigue. *JCSCORE*, 5(2), 94-131. <https://doi.org/10.15763/issn.2642-2387.2019.5.2.94-131>
5. Williams, D. R. (2018). Stress and the Mental Health of Populations of Color: Advancing Our Understanding of Race-related Stressors. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 59(4), 466–485. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146518814251>



CPH-NEW is a Center for Excellence to Promote a Healthier Workforce of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. CPH-News & Views is a semi-monthly column written by Center researchers on emerging topics related to healthy workplaces. These comments reflect thoughts of the individual researchers and do not represent conclusive research summaries, nor do they necessarily reflect a consensus among all Center personnel.

We welcome your responses and discussion. Please send all questions and comments to CPHNEW@uml.edu.