

Detour #1: Prioritizing Comfort Over Equity

(“Pacing for Privilege”)

This detour occurs when schools focus on accommodating the feelings and fears that white educators, students, and parents have about “difficult” conversations about race, rather than focusing on the need for progress and the needs of students of color. Advocates for equity are seen as “militant” or “angry,” while people who resist change are coddled.¹

The hard truth is, racial equity cannot be achieved with an obsessive commitment to “meeting people where they are” when “where they are” is contaminated with racial bias and privilege. Students, families, and educators experiencing racism cannot afford to wait for schools to ease their way toward a more serious racial equity vision.

What could be the danger in trying to identify and resolve racial differences in the experiences, education, and well-being of children? There should be nothing “wrong” with raising and addressing racially tense matters.

¹ **coddle (v):** to treat in an overprotective way; to treat with excessive care or kindness

Detour #2: Fixing Kids Rather Than Injustice

When schools attempt to “fix” students of color rather than confronting the structural conditions that students face. When schools focus entirely on teaching students about “grit,” resilience,² or how to have a positive mindset, they shift responsibility for dealing with inequity onto students.

Trying to resolve racial inequities by teaching students of color to have “grit” is like trying to solve climate change by teaching coastal communities to swim faster. Equity initiatives should focus on the conditions that marginalize students, not on “fixing” students.

² **resilience (n):** the ability to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.

Detour #3: The “Celebrating Diversity” Detour

This detour features initiatives that are crafted to help white students learn about “diversity” and “cultural differences” in ways that will be most comfortable for them, rather than naming or confronting *racism*. With this detour, equity initiatives can create an illusion of progress that makes matters worse.

In one school, students were asked to sit with classmates who were racially or ethnically different from themselves for a Diverse Friends Day. One student observed that “A lot of the white students don’t like us. I don’t want to be forced to hang out with them.” Another student said she didn’t see how disturbing her lunch—the only time she felt comfortable in a predominantly white school—would change others’ racist attitudes.

School Staff: Fearing or Facing Racial Encounters?

racial literacy (n): the ability to notice, understand, and resolve racially stressful situations.

racial stress (n): the stress that follows a *racial encounter* (anything from an awkward moment to obvious acts of prejudice)

Addressing racial politics requires complex knowledge, critical thinking, self-awareness, and relational skills that are sometimes missing in Predominantly White Schools. The following table compares the reactions of school staff who either fear or face racial encounters.³

| Fearing Racial Encounters | Facing Racial Encounters |
|---|---|
| When feeling personally challenged, worries about appearing to be racist or having character flaw; views racism as a moral and personal issue | When feeling personally challenged, can see resolution of the situation as more important than personal fears; views racism as systemic and political |
| Views racial stress as a threat (like an unstoppable tsunami) or an unsolvable problem | Views racial stress as a challenge (mountain worth climbing) that reveals a problem to be solved |
| Less competent at racial negotiation because <i>avoidance</i> is primary coping strategy | More competent at racial negotiation because <i>curiosity</i> is primary coping strategy |
| Less skillful about racial conflict resolution and more concerned about preventing public humiliation or a political disaster | Works to resolve racial conflicts directly as a statement of a school's ability to teach students about the world |

³ Adapted from Chapter 3, "Fearing Racial Discourse," in *Promoting Racial Literacy in Schools* by Howard Stevenson (2014).