Theory of Inequality: Growing Up "Color-Blind"

For the past five summers, I've worked as a camp counselor for a youth summer camp in my hometown for children in kindergarten through 7th grade. The camp runs for eight weeks, Monday through Friday, at a recreational park in Moultonborough, New Hampshire. Typically, the camp hosts about 80 campers and 15 counselors, separated into four groups based on age. Reflecting the small, rural, predominantly white middle-upper-class town population, the camp lacks racial diversity, among other types such as socioeconomic and cultural, with few campers and counselors of color. This past summer, one of my youngest campers, a five-year-old boy, quietly pointed out that two of my fellow counselors had skin much darker than his own before asking me why this was the case and if it was "ok," in his own words, "for people to be different colors."

Here stood a young and curious child, observing differences in the people around him, drawing comparisons between them and himself, and attempting to make sense of what these differences meant by asking questions. I think the fact that he asked if the differences he noticed in skin color were "ok" suggests that he wasn't sure if it was socially acceptable according to the standard appearance of his community, the lack of difference he'd been exposed to, and the messages he received about what is normal, whether conveyed explicitly or solely through observation. I wasn't necessarily surprised by his question, as I knew from my own experience growing up in the same town that he likely hadn't been exposed to much diversity and recognized that at a young age, he probably hadn't had many, if any, conversations about race. At the same time, this was the first time in my many years of working with kids in my community that I'd been asked a question like this, and I must admit that it made me hesitant. Much of my hesitation came from not wanting to overstep my role as a counselor, as I'd been instructed in

camp training not to engage in conversations about religion, politics, or other potentially divisive issues and to respond to questions or comments about such topics with "we don't talk about this at camp." While I believe that the point of avoiding conversations about controversial subjects was to avoid making anyone at camp uncomfortable or offending them and their parents, I couldn't help but wonder what kind of message my silence or dismissal would send. If not at camp, then where and when would he have these conversations? Would he have them at all?

Reflecting on my own experience growing up in a community where I was able to relate with my peers and teachers due to sharing racial and socioeconomic identities, I realize that the "hushed" approach to issues such as race was something I'd seen throughout my primary education. In school, my teachers rarely talked about race and racism because, from what I understand, it wasn't considered a relevant issue in our mostly homogeneous community nor a core subject of our curriculum. On the occasions that race was mentioned, it was usually talked about as either a historical issue, ending with the Civil Rights Movement, or an issue that was distant from our community, existing elsewhere. Additionally, my teachers, along with members of my family and other members of my community, would often overlook or minimize the racialized experiences of others by claiming, with good intentions, that race didn't matter because we should judge based on someone's character rather than the color of their skin. I think that this type of approach is meant to instill values of social acceptance and equality, but that it is from the misguided perspective that racism and inequality are perpetrated by "a few bad apples" or only those who deliberately seek to cause harm. In reality, racism is systematic and ingrained in all of us, and as a result, challenging racial inequality requires intentional and constant action.

As I learned from the article "Martin Luther King Fixed It," which I read in my sophomore year of college, referring to race as a problem of the past, a distant issue that didn't

impact me or my community, or as an insignificant characteristic, is consistent with a culture of color-blindness that ignores existing racial injustices and acts as a master narrative that upholds inequality (Rogers). Racial inequality, though overlooked and undermined by a "color-blind" narrative, was pervasive in my school, with examples including students of color being subjected to racial slurs by their white peers to the point where they transferred schools, a group of students who moved from Puerto Rico being referred to as problem students and held to lower expectations by their teachers than their white peer, resulting in adopting low expectations for themselves, and reading lists in most classes being dominated by stories written by and featuring mainly white protagonists. While I observed such inequalities taking place, I didn't question them at the time because I understood them as how things were because race and inequality didn't seem to be worth talking about. The message I received from race not being discussed by my teachers or covered in the curriculum was that it was an issue that wasn't pertinent to my learning and therefore not as important as other subjects or topics I studied.

Ultimately, avoiding conversations about race and pretending that inequality wasn't an issue that impacted our community didn't make it any less real or present but normalized inequality and allowed it to operate without resistance.

Racial inequality, among many other forms of social inequality, as something that is deeply embedded into the systems and institutions of this country, manifests in our everyday experiences in both overt and subtle ways. Color-blindness, as a way for white people to distance themselves from race, contributes to inequality by minimizing the impact that race has on people's experiences and thus legitimizing systems of oppression. Not acknowledging the systematic role that race plays in learning outcomes and access to educational opportunities, for example, reinforces the idea that these differences are caused by inherent cultural differences in

work ethic or the valuing of education, ignoring the systematic barriers in place rather than pushing back against them. Even if we are not intentionally contributing to systems of inequality, if not actively challenging them, we are benefiting from and working within them, therefore upholding them.

Returning to my interaction with my young camper this past summer, it's worth acknowledging how children, even at a young age, see differences between people and form impressions of what these differences mean based on the messages they receive from their environment. Not wanting my silence to send the message that skin color shouldn't be talked about or that race doesn't matter, I responded to my camper's questions about skin color by explaining that people have different amounts of something called melanin in their skin that makes their skin either lighter or darker. I added that a variance of appearances makes the world more beautiful, like how drawing with different colored markers or crayons makes for a more vivid picture, and that the world would be boring if everyone and everything looked the same. Reflecting on my response, I believe that explaining skin color as a biological trait and difference as a positive thing was a good start, but only a start at best to a much-needed, longer, more nuanced conversation about the relationship between skin color, race, and inequality. This conversation is something I fear might not take place due to the color-blind narrative that operates in schools and communities, especially those that are predominantly white like my own.

Works Cited

Rogers, Leoandra Onnie, Ursula Moffitt, and Christina Foo. "Martin Luther King Fixed It": Children Making Sense of Racial Identity in a Colorblind Society." *Child Development* 92.5 (2021): 1817-1835.