

Pediatric Insight

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Fierce Conversations Advance the Dialogue on Racism in Academia

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Academia has embraced and validated the business literature observation that diversity and inclusion are necessary and critical cultural characteristics to advance the work, and success of any organization. Indeed, a robust literature exists to show that diverse communities are more innovative, more quickly advance solutions to complex problems and in medicine – help to drive improved quality and outcomes. But just as most medical schools have responded by establishing offices focused on diversity and inclusion goals few have seen the results of these efforts realize and advance the purposes for which these offices were intended to achieve. The recent tragic deaths and demonstrations in the street in so many communities and around the world have upped the discussion ante from how to advance diversity, equity and inclusion to how can we identify and eliminate racism to build cultures of ‘anti-racism’ as a goal. Systemic racism is a lot “hotter” and a more personal topic than diversity, inclusion and equity to handle in a mixed group of people of color and white colleagues. But unless we’re ready to move into the unmasking and unpacking of the policies and practices that support and enable structural racism, there is little chance that progress will be made. So where do we start? The first step has to be a recognition of the problem. None of us in leadership positions have fully embraced this understanding. Second, we begin to create safe zones for **fierce** conversations that raise awareness and understanding of unconscious bias, and words and actions that are racially-biased and hurtful to a culture of inclusion and diversity. Third, we advance these understandings to develop shared values and actions that will and must drive true change. Leaders have a critical role in this journey and those that understand the value, see the promise and realize the needed change, are those that will truly advance the culture of their community to achieve their organizational and personal goals.

Anti-racism and the challenge in Pediatrics

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) took a major step in declaring the harms of racism on children and adolescents with well-documented specificity in a 2019 policy statement (reference link). Little did they know that the impact of racism on the Covid 19 pandemic victims and the witnessing of the George Floyd murder would ignite a firestorm response in the U.S. and abroad. All of the major medical organizations have now issued statements pledging justice and the importance of dismantling structural/institutional racism. This is a critical concern for pediatricians with responsibilities that include understanding and addressing factors in a child's environment that contribute to ill health, are unsafe, dangerous or even threatening. The negative impact of racism during child development can not be ignored, and includes experiences that internalize racist thoughts and actions as well as the negative impact to an individual child's perceived worth and value within a community. Beyond the individual level, collective racist views, and actions overt and non-overt lead to 'structural racism' – when society excludes people from minority backgrounds from participation in social institutions. The recognition of the historical existence of structural racism is well-documented, but the recent witnessing of murder fueled by racial and biased intent has brought forth a united cry reiterating a return to an agenda to attack racism head on. Most organizations embrace the narrative that includes diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) with the recognition that DEI solidarity statements are not enough. Innovative strategies come from diverse community members working together in a way that increase institutional understanding and awareness of the practices and policies that foster racism and promote the practices and policies that support anti-racism. Long-term investment in pipeline programs, educational curricular inclusion of racial issues and research that directs scholarly attention to root causes and successful interventions is increasingly being championed by our organizations charged with caring of the well-being of all children. As a step forward we offer two specific strategies to move beyond the anti-racist statements to definitive actions 'Leadership Readiness' and enabling 'Fierce Conversations'.

Leadership Readiness

Ruggs and Avery present a compelling argument for why organizational leaders should step up to respond and then, what can they do to demonstrate an institutional commitment to anti-racism. The framework presents an action plan going forward: Speak up, Educate yourself, Walk the talk, Invest and Engage in introspection.

- *Speak Up:*

Silence can be interpreted as assent when there is no message condemning racial injustice and systemic racism. It signals one's lack of recognition of racism as a

problem. Words and actions make a difference to faculty, staff and trainees who see support from faculty leadership who are not under-represented minority members.

- *Educate yourself*

A leader should be informed on the way racism affects children and their families as well as black and brown people in general. There are myriads of options with anti-racist book lists from the New York Times', An Anti-racist Reading List (2019) to local library systems. No single book is a guide and reading doesn't instantly change the reader, but it can be part of the process. Shared learning experiences can open a dialogue with others that enriches the process even more.

- *Walk the talk*

Creating spaces for honest and open dialogue improves institutional climate. Open dialogue creates opportunities for transparency in communication from leaders at all levels of the hierarchy. Recognition of implicit bias is a risk issue and it should be assessed in strategies that engage faculty and staff.

- *Invest*

As a leader, one can work with one's institution to align its business and community support to organizations that improve conditions for minorities and other marginalized people.

- *Engage in Introspection*

Structural racism within an institution is reflected in policies and practices starting with a commitment to diversify the workforce and train faculty and staff in culturally competent care according to national standards. Internal examination should include a review of racial inequities in salary, leadership status, promotion, and retention. This results of such an examination help to formulate the action items for mitigation of such inequities.

Fierce Conversations

A successful action plan requires leaders to be active listeners and anticipate discomfort and conflict as a part of cultural change. Open and transparent discussions need to occur if the culture is really going to change, discussions that are "robust, intense, strong, powerful, passionate, eager, unbridled, uncurbed, untamed, **fierce conversations**". It is not likely to result in change if conversations are superficial, diluted or diverted to safer topics, restricted, or dismissed as unimportant. Fierce conversations are guided by 7 principles:

- Interrogate reality without identifying any blame, going beyond the superficial

- Make the conversation real even if it scares you to death
- Focus intentionally when engaged in the conversation like nothing else matters for that time
- Deal with the toughest challenges first
- Listen and act on instincts that are based on your observations
- Recognize and take responsibility for the impact of the messages you deliver after the conversation is over
- Keep the conversation at a pace that allows pauses and breathing space for those engaged in the conversation

In summary, Leadership Readiness is a part of the first steps in recognizing the extent to which the culture of an organization can knowingly and unknowingly advance bias and racist barriers to full inclusion. Conversations that raise awareness of the issues and opportunities are part of a structural and experiential methodology for which there are curricula and program models available. **But A single conversation is not enough.** We are all a part of the problem of structural racism, and we need to commit to anti-racist fierce conversations in our organizations and institutions where we work. Our role as leaders leans more to inquiry, listening and influencing and less to knowing and providing. Moving in the direction of equitable, safe, and anti-racist environments is a stepwise progression fraught with possibilities for error, but much promise. By advancing these understandings we have greater potential to move forward and achieve the rewards that will be realized with successful change.

Suggested References

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