

A Series of 5 articles, "Conversations about Race in Queen Anne's County,"

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Published weekly in *The Record Observer* and *The Bay Times*, August 5 - September 2, 2016

As we spoke on the telephone last week, I ask that you publish my guest opinion written in a series of 4 articles meant to be published one weekly over a period of 4 weeks. I have entitled the series "Conversations about Race in Queen Anne's County." The fourth article focusing on micro aggressions is in very rough draft form at this time.

Author Background

Dr. Mary Wilson Leventhal teaches in Queen Anne's County, Maryland, since 2001. Her early teaching experience began in Philadelphia inner city schools in the late 1960s at a time when conversations about race were leading headlines. Motivated by her teaching experiences, she authored "Intercultural Awareness in Rural Title 1 Elementary School Teaching Practices" (2012). Having devoted more than 40 years to education, Dr. Leventhal has served education as a teacher, administrator, parent volunteer, community advocate, school board member, and mentor to preservice teachers. She has worked in public, private, and international schools and universities as well as corporate board rooms. She has a Doctorate of Education in Teacher Leadership from Walden University, an M.B.A. from the University of Hong Kong, and a B.Sc. in Elementary Education, *summa cum laude*, from Temple University. Dr. Leventhal is bilingual and has traveled extensively throughout the world.

Conversations about Race in Queen Anne's County - Part 1

A group of concerned citizens opened conversations about race in Queen Anne's County on Sunday night, June 26. About 60 QAC citizens sat together at tables of 6-8 where African Americans and European Americans shared family style discussions over a home-cooked supper. Everyone talked about what race meant personally in their life experiences.

The evening arose through the work of the Multicultural Proficiency Subcommittee of the QAC Local Management Board, which is responsible for programs that uplift the lives of children and their families in our community. June 26 marked the first of what is planned to be monthly Sunday Suppers to Talk about Race.

Ironically, this important step took place just days before the horrific events in Dallas, St. Paul, and Baton Rouge unfolded. Last week's national experience with the racial divide has been festering since the 1960s when President Johnson facilitated legislation that squarely addressed civil rights. The lack of intercultural competence we continue to experience today in 2016 mirrors the civil unrest of the 60s.

Over the past few decades, conversations about race in Queen Anne's County have not been loud enough for most of us to hear. Given that the large majority of QAC citizens are European Americans, racial disparity has not been in most people's line of sight. Typically, being "White" has meant being omitted from conversations about racism. The QAC Sunday Suppers will help amplify the value of such conversations.

At the close of the June evening, we were invited to share insights from our table conversations about race. One woman volunteered that she had never thought about what it meant to be a White person in the community. She elaborated that this was in stark contrast to her newfound awareness of how "being Black" was integral to the everyday thinking of African Americans about themselves and the actions they chose to take.

This woman's experience demonstrates what is often commonly assumed without conscious thought, that is, that being an American is being *White*. Why else do we say *African American*, *Asian American*, *Hispanic American*, but do not bother to say *Euro American*?

I, too, am guilty of perpetuating this sociocultural perspective. When I wrote my doctoral dissertation on multicultural teaching practices, two academicians advised me to use *Euro American*, rather than *White* in my writing. I argued that the overwhelming majority of research continued to use the term *White* as a means of clearly identifying ways of distinct thinking about differences in race and culture. In retrospect, this argument is valid only if readers recognize White power with its inherent privileges and assumptions.

So why has it been hard for us to have conversations about race? Current demographic data should help us to talk freely. According to the U.S. 2010 Census, Maryland already has a population with a 53% majority defined by what were once called minority groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). This same census projected the minority population would be the majority

nationwide by 2042. The data does not appear to have helped us because these statistics do not describe the make-up of our county with its African American population of only seven percent.

Violence across our nation over the past few weeks has stimulated more conversations about race nationwide. June's QAC Sunday Supper stimulated us to acknowledge that here in Queen Anne's County we live in a White culture. Now we need to act on that knowledge to appreciate values, beliefs, and worldviews that differ from our own. They call on us to go beyond our conversations and act on correcting inequities that exist in the fabric of our own community.

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Conversations about Race in Queen Anne's County - Part 2

Conversations about race in Queen Anne's County have been going on for decades, but the volume of these conversations is finally getting loud enough for more of us to hear and listen. Given that our demographic data does not mirror what most of Maryland and our neighboring counties look like, it has been easy to take a pass on participating in these conversations. Our county's population is about 90% Caucasian, so not only is it easy to avoid such conversations, but it is also easy to disengage from any civic action that bolsters multiculturalism and social justice.

It is also easier to hand the responsibility to address problems and outcomes stemming from racial disparity to our police and teachers. Yes, people in these jobs are committed to serving the community and working to make it a better place with each contribution they provide. This is a natural beachhead. However, recent conversations about race are louder and more robust, telling us more than that is needed.

Many recent national conversations included talk about renewed training and systems for our police force. Yet a just and equitable society cannot be built entirely on training and revamping systems. Training and systems are directed at a subset of our society. This can help community leaders with a skill set, but racial inequities come about because of our mindsets.

When we learn to recognize our own mindset, we can then internalize that understanding so our personal actions support fair treatment and equitable opportunities for everyone. In that way we are ready to build meaningful skill sets in support of a stronger, more just, community. Recognition of personal mindsets is not the sole responsibility of our uniformed police. The community's entire citizenry must be engaged.

Tackling the mindsets of people is difficult. It means taking time for introspection where we think about why we behaved in a particular way. It requires finding ways to help individuals to reflect on their behavior. Awareness of your own mindset heightens your awareness of differences and similarities in other peoples' thinking. This is where conversations about race can

make a positive difference in our lives. Conversations can remove a deficit worldview that impairs relationships and weakens society.

One of Queen Anne's County's early conversations about race involved a November 1993 audit of our public schools conducted by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). The audit assessed how student diversity was being served. The January 1994 final report had 16 recommendations to strengthen equitable service to our student population. The audit stimulated a valuable conversation to build awareness of a need. We were called upon to act.

Twenty years later, local resident Mary Walker who strongly advocates for social justice in our schools brought the document to the attention of school officials. In 2014 she pointed out that the 16 recommendations made in 1994 were not implemented fully to bring positive change. Because there is a large majority of Caucasian students and families making up our school community, it was easy to forget that action must follow meaningful conversation.

Let's not step back from participating in conversations about race in Queen Anne's County. These conversations lay the groundwork for increasing our awareness of our personal identity. Through greater self-knowledge we increase our sensitivity towards others and gain an awareness of social discourse that results in unjust practices toward those who are different from oneself. Once more of us share our awareness of our personal mindsets, we will cultivate acceptance, adaptation, and integration of other worldviews into our daily lives. This enables us to act equitably in our schools, on the street, and everywhere in our community.

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Conversations about Race in Queen Anne's County - Part 3

Conversations about race get personal. When approached with honesty among people of different colors, they spark the innermost feelings. Rich, frank conversations are valuable when they produce constructive, meaningful change in our society.

With the launch of Queen Anne's County's Sunday Supper to Talk about Race on June 26, about 60 citizens joined together in raising an awareness of the need to have these kinds of conversations in our own community.

In conversations among 6-8 citizens at each table, a lot of the June QAC Sunday Supper discussion focused on the value of cultivating a shared awareness of racial disparities so that positive action would ensue. Citizens sought action that is inclusive of all people regardless of skin color and is supportive of our young adults coming out of our local schools.

The impetus to have conversations about race began in our schools. It is in U.S. schools across the nation that an achievement gap is apparent between minority subgroups compared with the

Caucasian student subgroup. This gap is tracked so that instructional strategies can be developed to increase minority student achievement when measured against Caucasian student achievement.

Created in 2003, the Multicultural Proficiency Subcommittee of our QAC Local Management Board is attune to this achievement gap in Queen Anne's County. Their conversations propelled the Character Counts Program and mentoring for our public school students. The committee meets one morning each month and regularly examines data on the education, employment, and well-being of our county's youth. The QACPS Task Force for Accelerating Minority Achievement similarly analyzes school achievement data on a regular basis.

Teachers are charged with the responsibility to value and support each student's identity amidst the cultural diversity of the classroom. Lack of multicultural proficiency often generates impediments in teaching practices aimed at improving the student achievement of underperforming sociocultural subgroups. Multicultural proficiency in every teacher is essential so as to avoid stereotyping and teaching that is limited to behaviors and expectations found in the dominant White culture.

Embracing a variety of instructional practices in support of diversity requires more than hiring a more diverse staff, although this is important, too. It is important to recognize that not only do differences exist between cultures, but there is also diversity within cultures. Every cultural group can be broken into socioeconomic subgroups. For example, sociological studies have shown that upper- and middle-class African Americans share more cultural characteristics with upper- and middle-class European Americans than they do with lower-class African Americans and European Americans.

Culturally responsive teaching practices are an effective way to address the achievement gap because diverse cultural characteristics are welcomed as opportunities to strengthen learning. Cultural differences are not seen as deficiencies to be filled. There must be acknowledgement of teacher expectations and experiences that determine their chosen practices for motivating student learning.

Cultural self-knowledge in teachers is an important factor affecting student achievement. It is the underpinning of culturally responsive teaching. Teachers need to consider how they are expressing self-knowledge of their own cultures and of the sociocultural expectations that they bring into the teaching-learning transaction. The effect of a teacher's mindset on teaching practices is revealed through reflective thinking.

It is challenging to increase culturally responsive teaching across our schools without professional development to foster introspection among teachers, administrators, and education support professionals. By meeting this challenge, we provide the potential to minimize negative influences on the learning process through cultural miscues. Just as conversations about race get personal, such professional development will get personal, too - giving rise to action for the

benefit of our children. Meaningful conversations raise self-knowledge and self-understanding of our own mindset. From there, effective skill sets can be developed.

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Conversations about Race in Queen Anne's County - Part 4

Conversations about race began in earnest in Queen Anne's County with the gathering of about 60 QAC citizens over supper at the Kramer Center in late June. Groups of six or eight diverse people spoke sociably at each table about their lived experiences with race. Violence across our nation triggered a willingness to talk about a topic often left untouched.

As this first step in courageous conversations began, many realized that more talk among neighbors and colleagues who are different from one another would strengthen our community. Others remarked on the vitality of purpose offered when the knowledge we share is evidence-based.

One such strand of knowledge is the "school-to-prison pipeline," a phenomenon evident across America. Here is where the work of our teachers and policemen intersect as community leaders who seek to build a strong, integrated society.

When statistics showed that the number of students who failed to master reading and had behavior problems in grade 3 correlated with the number of those who would be imprisoned as young adults, educators and policemen took special note. More attention grew as the body of evidence further connected how suspension from school for misbehavior was the number-one predictor of children who drop out of school and have a greater likelihood of unemployment and imprisonment.

Senator Richard Durbin, D-Ill., held the first federal hearing on the school-to-prison pipeline in 2013 to address policies that favored incarceration over education. Zero tolerance policies for student misbehavior were not working. Data showed suspensions had doubled from the level of the 1970s and suspensions were not helping students. In 2010, more than 3 million students were suspended from school. Misbehavior was rewarded with time off from school.

The hearing also brought attention to the fact that Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than Caucasian students. At the National Education Association's Black Caucus, caucus chairman Jacqui Greadington advised that bias starts early. "Black children represent 18 percent of pre-school children, but account for 48 percent of pre-school suspensions – yes, we're talking about 4-year-olds."

In fact, nearly one in three Black men will spend time in U.S. prisons. By 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice ordered school districts to respond to misbehavior with non-discrimination

and fairness. Educators devoted more energy to implementing culturally responsive teaching practices that combat “cultural deficit thinking.” Teachers were asked to renew their commitment to greater self-awareness of their own sociocultural expectations, beliefs, and values that influence student achievement.

At the same time, “restorative practices,” derived from effective ways to rehabilitate prisoners have become increasingly popular in schools. The Restorative Justice program in schools moves away from punishment. The focus is on restoring a sense of well-being for the student and teacher who have been affected by a hurtful act. It is a way for teachers to work through the root of disciplinary issues by building strong, productive relationships with all students of all sociocultural backgrounds.

This is especially important given that about 80 percent of all U.S. public school teachers are Caucasian, unlike the diversity of today’s student body. When teachers pay particular attention to the feelings of students, they embrace the opportunity to gain insight on how students feel personally about events that influence learning.

In Queen Anne’s County, when leadership of the Multicultural Proficiency Committee has worked to bring citizens together to talk about race, they are asking for more than an emotional exchange of experiences. Meaningful conversations about race encourage personal interaction and community building. Courageous conversations help to build positive relationships that go on to build a brighter future for all of the children in our county.

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Conversations about Race - Part 5

Recently, I was trying to make sense of contentious conversations about race being played out throughout our country. How can these conversations be so hard in an American culture built on a melting pot of peoples sharing a common language?

As a teacher, I am often reminded of the importance and value of a common language that is shared among all stakeholders. We believe that when everyone shares an understanding of the language we are speaking, we can achieve amazing goals that benefit the greater good for our community.

Just as I was ruminating over how these aspects affect the role we as individuals play in the circumstance of racial disparity, a school psychologist's email message popped up on my computer. Its title: "Classroom Supports for Children with Trauma." It was addressed to me as one of many on staff in three public schools.

While it was apparent that the contents of the email were not aimed at raising teacher awareness of systemic racism, they addressed the need for teachers to be alert to children in our classrooms who are in need of special support at a time of stress in their lives. The email message referred teachers to a toolkit that itemized events and situations that can cause trauma in children.

This email triggered deeper thinking in me about what researchers call "implicit bias" and how that might contribute to ongoing trauma for the African American children I teach. As U.S. citizens, we speak the same English language and share an American culture, yet all of us have implicit biases. We act, behave, and respond to situations with little awareness of our own attitudes. We generally do not spend time thinking about stereotypes we hold from the environment in which we live.

As teachers of children, we owe it to children to get our language right. Our preservice studies and training have called upon us to use culturally responsive teaching practices. This means we cannot be "colorblind."

Once held as a desirable value, being colorblind actually indicates that we do not recognize how lived experiences and our social environment impact people and the thoughts they have about themselves. To many of us, being colorblind signals that we are all alike no matter what happens. That simply is not true.

Understanding this fact about opting to be colorblind with our interactions of all people can help clarify the divergent thinking about the meaning of "Black Lives Matter." As a Caucasian, I cannot presume to understand how the circumstance of living in a predominantly White culture as an African American affects the psyche. I only know that my own experiences are very different from the lived experiences of African Americans in the United States since the early days of slavery, through the 1960s civil rights movement, and the current unfolding of data-driven incidents of racial prejudice.

Most U.S. teachers share a White, monolingual, middle-class, female teaching culture that is a mismatch with the increasingly multicultural student population. This mismatch can impede teaching practices aimed at strengthening student achievement regardless of sociocultural backgrounds.

With this knowledge in mind, teachers can facilitate personalized learning. Teachers can ensure that students of all racial backgrounds succeed in their learning. This is what culturally responsive teaching is all about - connecting with kids to understand their motivations and aspirations. When we teachers get our language right, we spend a lot of time listening so we can minimize negative influences on the learning process through cultural miscues. In our conversations with our students and their families, we take responsibility for building a brighter future for all of the children in our county.

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