



Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, Inc.

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR COMMENTARY

White Privilege and Empathy

By **Robert Rader**, Executive Director, CABE

I attended the second meeting of SDE’s “Examining Unconscious Bias in the Hiring and Selection Process” on April 27. SDE has been bringing together a number of city districts to discuss these issues.

One of the most interesting aspects of this meeting was the filling out of a survey by each attendee, the “White Privilege Worksheet”. It was based on the article “White Privilege and Male Privilege” by Dr. Peggy McIntosh (1989), former associate director of the Wellesley Centers for Women (WCW) and founder of the [National SEED Project](#) (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity).

Now, while I was not crazy about the title, it opened my eyes in new ways. The idea of “white privilege” is not an easy concept, but understanding it is critical to helping to right injustices in our society.

So, what is “white privilege”?

It is a Belief (some would say “fact”) which suggests that white people in our society have certain advantages as a result of their race. As the majority of people in our country are white and have been in positions of power throughout our history, society naturally provides whites with certain advantages that have to be “earned”, if they are possessed at all, by people of color.

Dr. McIntosh said that privilege “exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do. Access to privilege doesn’t determine one’s outcomes, but it is definitely an asset that makes it more likely that whatever talent, ability, and aspirations a person with privilege has will result in something positive for them.”

The survey gives a person an opportunity to “stand in the shoes” of others, just by reading the questions. It strengthens understanding of white and male privilege by the reader’s assumption that those who are not privileged have been faced by the situations in the questions.

Here are some of the sample questions (the whole survey can be found at <http://crc-global.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/white-privilege.pdf>.) The rating system was 5, which meant “always true for you”, 3 for “sometimes true for you” or 0 for “rarely true for you.”

We were told to answer the questions as we saw ourselves as white or persons of color:

- I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
- I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
- When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
- I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
- I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
- Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance that I am financially reliable.
- I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people in my racial group.
- I can remain oblivious to the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world’s majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
- If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.
- I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children’s magazines featuring people of my race.

- I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
- I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.
- I can choose blemish cover or bandages in “flesh” color and have them more or less match my skin.

When we had finished filling out the survey, attendees were asked to stand in order of their scores, from highest (which would suggest more answers of “always true” or “sometimes true”) to those with the lowest scores, indicating more scores of “rarely true for you”.

Not surprisingly, attendees separated by race. All people of color tended to have lower scores, while whites had higher scores, even among those of us who see ourselves as more “liberal” in general.

I thought about what this meant. While no one test can show where a person is on all matters of this type, it made me think of what it must feel like to be a person of color (we keep away from “minority” because, in parts of the country, the minority is now the “majority”). Even when I decided to retake the test as a “minority”, specifically Jewish, my scores remained high.

Privilege and Empathy

One of the most important and powerful emotional intelligence skills is “empathy”. **Dr. Daniel Goleman** has written that empathy “means having the ability to sense others’ feelings and how they see things. You take an active interest in their concerns. You pick up cues to what’s being felt and thought. With empathy, you sense unspoken emotions. You listen attentively to understand the other person’s point of view, the terms in which they think about what’s going on.”

Empathy is critical to building consensus and being sensitive to the needs of others. For Board members and Superintendents, taking or, at least reading the White Privilege Worksheet will, for a moment, let you stand in the shoes of others.

How you use the knowledge gained from an exercise like this will help you become more understanding of others. I hope it will help you and your school district become more sensitive to the needs of ALL students.