

Still hanging: Reflections of the Washburn hate crime

Written by K. Stanley Brooks, Ph.D., assistant professor of education, Bethel University, St. Paul
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Do the lives of people of color have value in Minnesota or our country as a whole?

The question stems from the substantial daily amount of psychological and physical violence and intense force in their direction. Violence in the United States is undoubtedly a characteristic of the "American" way of life. The narrative of how relevant this characteristic of violence has been in the lives of people of color is disregarded in many settings, especially schools.

Children often reflect the racial unresolved issues of the elders, the adults. Their actions are displaying the areas we are collectively acting as if it doesn't exist. Issues unaddressed do not go away, they fester and explode. Today's generation of young people seem to be familiar with surface, superficial, stereotypical, prejudicial aspects of history but not the specific narratives in their entirety. This is a key element of what has taken place at three local high schools in the past month.

When one is well informed of the long list of violent hate crimes toward African-Americans and other people of color throughout history, one thinks of the Billie Holiday song, "Strange Fruit," which is the story of a Black male hanging from a tree or streetlight pole. And just as this picture is sketched into the minds of many, these cultural tensions are still hanging in our midst.

The acts of psychological, physical and emotional violence toward people of color are not surprising. The shallow method of building human relationships prevents people from looking at not only triumph, but also tragedy. In actuality, thinking critically through all issues address challenges and promotes peaceful positive solutions. Empowering students teaches them to love themselves and their neighbors, not to be fearful and suspicious. Positive imagery honoring white/European-Americans overwhelm our literature, monuments, landmarks, films and media outlets, even to the point of unrealistic exaggeration in some cases.

Students I have taught at the college level are unfamiliar with the legacy of institutional racism. Not only do many of our white/European brothers and sisters lack knowledge about human relations dynamics, but many of our students of color are very unfamiliar with accurate historical events. The tension and fear is present, but information of the origination of these age-old challenges is not covered appropriately in many pre-kindergarten through 12th grade settings. Social studies and history classes are either inadequately covering our American multicultural narratives in their entirety, or passed over altogether. Many educators appear to neglect the connection between positive imagery with esteem and self-worth for all children. From a leadership standpoint, are there officials in decision-making positions to advocate for all children without limitations on what they are able to implement or accomplish? Or is this an unreasonable or unrealistic expectation for parents?

Washburn High School

Terminology assists in how people categorize information.

The refusal to categorize the simulated lynching of an African-American person as a hate crime is disturbing. It's disappointing that African-American and Latino-American males are consistently assumed to be viewed as rule breakers and criminal miscreants more than white

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males – even though, the overwhelming national pattern of senseless school and mass shootings have been at the hands of white males. Why does the white male profile never seem to be tainted to the same degree as boys of color? The disparity of suspension data for many school districts nationally reinforces this double standard. To minimize the action of the white students who hung this doll over the ledge at Washburn High School as “an ignorant mistake” without harmful intent is an act of psychological and emotional violence itself. To identify this hate crime as a thoughtless prank that was not racially motivated is an insult to the humanity of all who are observing the protection of these white students as harmless nice kids who didn’t intend to hurt anyone. This one act does not define who the kids are as people in totality, but every behavior and comment originates from a thought.

The Washburn response is typical of how we as a nation handle issues of this racial magnitude. Many white Americans do not understand the impact of this incident on all people involved because they are not consistent targets of harm or violence for simply being white. Black and brown boys rarely are given the courtesy and benefit of the doubt, as white kids are afforded, even in less offensive circumstances. At the top of the professional development agenda should be increasing the intercultural effectiveness of teachers, staff and students. Conducting consistent forums and panels with students and parents voices put schools in a position to be proactive. There isn’t shame in addressing the issue, but there is in ignoring it.

These are the sole thoughts of K. Stanley Brooks, and in no way represent the expressed opinions of Bethel University.