

Be proactive in addressing racism

by Bambi Betts

The recent UN summit on racism has no doubt prompted international schools worldwide to relook at policies, practices and the general ethos surrounding this issue at our schools. While it was somewhat controversial in its ultimate content, it has at least served the purpose of reminding us once again of the centrality of this issue for today's educators.

There is little doubt that racism is one of the most pressing issues keeping us from achieving a better, more peaceful life for human beings around the globe. While the summit dealt with the issue on a global scale, its proceedings pointed out over and over again that the roots of institutionalized racism begin with childhood interactions and adult responses to those interactions.

International schools have long claimed to be laboratories for promoting tolerance and understanding, promoting the notion of unity through diversity, and even teaching the skills and attitudes of effective global citizenship.

Do positive attitudes about all human beings just happen because we work and live along side each other? The conditions certainly exist for that possibility, but, as with most concepts and ideas we attempt to teach our students, assuming that the environment will eventually produce the attitude is shortsighted.

So what can the international school principal do to help ensure that a forum on racism will no longer be needed a generation from now? What can you do as a school leader to increase the possibility that each student leaves your school with not only the habits which counter racism, but also the habits of mind and heart that turn diversity into opportunities for all?

First, you can examine the assumptions surrounding the issue of racism. The most common mis-assumptions which are prevalent in international schools are:

1. Because the school population is culturally diverse, students will not develop racist habits.
2. Children do not notice differences amongst people, and therefore they are not curious about them.
3. The very experience of being in a diverse setting will counteract the racist messages sent through the media, however subtle.
4. Everyone in the school community is in agreement about the gravity of the racism.
5. Students' attitudes about racism are largely a result of how their parents think.

Once these are identified, there are a variety of strategies a school leader might want to consider, such as:

Audit your curriculum for specific opportunities to expand the dialogue on racism. There are many resources available, including sites such as www.tolerance.com and www.racismnoway.com.au.

1. Engage students in simulations which help them experience the emotional issue related to intolerance.
2. Consider diversity training for your faculty. We may mistakenly make the assumption that everyone who chooses to be in an international school environment is fully prejudice-free, or minimally knows how to ensure prejudices are not transferred to students. Racist habits are often unknown to the perpetrator. A good program in diversity training will help faculty members recognize these behaviors in themselves and provide them with tools to modify them.
3. Make racial slurs as serious as the most serious offense in your school.
4. In your parent education program, include elements of the same diversity training. Many parents may be in a diverse setting for the first time and will also need some skills to assist their children (and themselves).

The message here is be proactive. There is some excellent research (see sites listed above) which helps us understand that taking the "silent" approach, assuming that if we don't see evidence of overt racism, that all is well. Considering that there is strong agreement that it is one of the most serious issues mankind is facing at this juncture, international schools must assume a large responsibility for proactively contributing to the solution.