

The Consequence and The Reentry

At this point, the school's top administrators already seemed to have lost interest in sorting through the levels of culpability among the account's different followers, likers and commenters. Some students who followed the account at first received two-day suspensions, but those were soon increased to the maximum suspension allowed under state regulations — five days — regardless of how much he or she interacted with the account....

By now, Charles was facing expulsion, as was one of his close friends, a Chinese American account follower whose racist comments on the posts indicated a higher level of involvement than the others. (That second expulsion was later blocked by a judge.) A third student, the one who touched A.'s hair, had agreed to go on independent study for the rest of the year. But the others were returning to school, and as their suspensions drew to a close, administrators found themselves confronting another problem: Somehow the kids who followed the account and the Black girls who were affected by it were going to have to go to school together.

Eventually school administrators hit upon a plan. A local nonprofit called SEEDS (Services that Encourage Effective Dialogue and Solutions) would hold a mediation session between the two groups of students on the day the 11 followers, likers and commenters were due to return to school.

The mediation was optional, but the 11 followers agreed to attend. Their motivations and expectations varied. Some wanted a chance to apologize to the girls in person or to deliver the apology letters they had written. Others just wanted to get back to school....

According to a timeline created by SEEDS and later filed in court, the moderators started with what was supposed to be a neutral, low-impact question — something like, "What are some of the things you really like about Albany High School?" They passed a rock around the room to signal each person's chance to reply. That part went well enough, although a number of the girls on the targeted side of the room opted to pass the rock along without speaking.

Then the moderators asked the people who had been affected by the account to talk about how they felt when it was discovered and how they had been impacted since. A. recalls saying that her sister had asked her why she was so sad all the time. "I shouldn't have to tell an 8-year-old that I'm being bullied and I can't feel good about myself," she said. "I shouldn't have to say that!"

The girls cried. Some of them yelled. They explained how deeply betrayed they felt. After everyone had a chance to speak, the Instagram group was asked to respond.

That's when things began to go terribly, horribly wrong. The first problem was that the main culprits weren't in the room. The mediation was for students who were returning to classes, so the three students who were considered most culpable hadn't been invited. The 11 followers who came to the mediation kept wanting to explain the limits of their involvement, to point out that they weren't the ones who had actually made the posts. One boy had only just started following the account. Another hardly ever went on Instagram and said he had never interacted with the account. A couple of others said they had liked the posts without really taking in the contents.

It wasn't me, they each wanted to say. I'm not the one who did this. I'm not a racist.

But the distinctions that felt so important to the account followers meant little to the people who had been targeted. Who cared which one of them drew the noose or compared A. to a gorilla? The point was that the people in that room had seen those things and had given them their approval, whether overt or implied.

"I really thought they would own up to what they did and, you know, kind of apologize," A. later told a news crew that covered the sit-in. "And a lot of it was them defending themselves and constantly saying, 'Well, I didn't really add to it by liking and commenting, I didn't really think I was a part of it.' And none of them were like, 'I'm so sorry, I'm taking full responsibility, I hate what I did, I don't agree with it.' I didn't hear that."

According to interviews with people who were there, the individual responses of the account followers varied significantly. Some were remorseful and contrite. Others were cocky or disengaged. All were desperately uncomfortable. Many wouldn't look up or meet the eyes of their accusers. The more emotional the targeted girls and their friends were, the more some of the followers focused on their own level of culpability rather than on the pain and hurt in front of them. "Bro, chill," is how A. characterizes their attitude. "Why are you taking it so seriously?"

Source:

https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/17/magazine/california-high-school-racist-instagram.html?unlocked_article_code=1.40w.gUu2.UbMWBRL7v3bh&smid=url-share