

Teaching While White

This past summer Mia McKenzie of Black Girl Dangerous published a piece entitled “All the White Teachers I Wish I Never Had.” In the piece, she discusses how during her early school years her entire world was Black, filled with family, friends and teachers who supported her academic curiosity.

“As a very bright, gifted Black girl, having Black teachers, mostly Black women, who saw my giftedness and encouraged and nurtured it, meant everything. These were teachers who could look at me and see themselves. They could see their children, their hopes, their dreams. These were teachers who could be as proud of me when I did well as my own family was, who could understand me when I talked about my life, and who knew how to protect the spirit of a gifted Blackgirlchild in a world they knew would try to tear her apart every chance it got.”

Ideally, every young student of color would have a teacher who looked like them and could understand all of the little things about their lives that are hidden to everyone else. Promoting a diverse teaching force is absolutely essential to the success of so many children. But we still find ourselves in a system where students of color make up more than half of the student population, but teachers of color only account for eighteen percent of the work force.

Let that sink in. Before we can even discuss what it means to be a white teacher who truly serves their students, we have to explore the implications of those numbers. Those numbers mean that the majority of students of color can go through their entire school careers having only one or two teachers that look like them. Imagine for a second that nearly every single person whose responsibility it is to impart formal knowledge does not look like you? Not only is that message harmful, but it is just one of many damaging messages students of color are forced to endure. So while I understand that there are good white teachers, that’s not the only issue here. White educators are not teaching in isolation. Our overwhelming presence in schools and classrooms across the country in and of itself requires that we reevaluate the way we engage with students. Because the reality is that regardless of our intentions, we are capable of inflicting harm, both by what we do and what we don’t do. For too many students of color, white teachers can be just another point of “white authority” in their lives, especially if their experiences, voices, and perspectives aren’t valued.

Furthermore, in a school system where students are being placed under immense amounts of pressure to do well on standardized tests, and where they have to stand by and watch as their community schools are systematically eliminated, it is more important than ever that they are able to come into a classroom that feels safe. They need to know that regardless of their grades and scores, we are still here for them . . . that we continue to believe they are capable of great things. They need to be shown kindness and compassion. They need to have a safe place to have hard conversations and explore all of the issues that feel relevant to them. They need to be heard, but even more crucially? They need to feel loved. This may seem simple. You may be thinking, well duh. But every single white teacher in America has been raised in a society that feeds us stereotypes of people of color and undermines their humanity, that continuously devalues Black life, and that created an entire socio-economic system based on the subjugation of others. You

cannot grow up white in this society without developing deeply embedded biases. When our own privilege has been built up by oppressing those who look like our students, being a good teacher takes on an entirely different meaning.

So how do we make sure that we really are validating students' experiences, hearing their voices, and ensuring that their perspectives are valued? How can we be the educators they need us to be? Too often, white educators feel as though not talking about race and privilege is the best route to take, inside and outside of the classroom. As white educators, we have to step outside of our comfort zones and have these conversations—embrace feeling uncomfortable and push ourselves to stay in this place to have conversations that matter. These issues affect the everyday lives of students, but even further they impact the very way that students are able to engage in the classroom. Ignoring that reality, or suppressing these topics when they come up, is doing a disservice to your students and yourself. Conversations about race and privilege will never be perfect, or easy, but there is a beauty in understanding that they can teach you just as much, if not more, than you can teach them.

Supporting students of color in your classroom, though, is about more than having conversations about race and privilege. It is about having high expectations for every single student that walks through your door. And when a student isn't doing well in class or has disengaged almost entirely? It's about working hard to figure out the root causes of the problem before ever considering discipline and punishment. We cannot be furthering the reach of the school-to-prison pipeline. In fact, when students of color face harsher punishment for the same infractions as white students, and those infractions can lead them straight into the juvenile justice system, we need to be actively working against it. Supporting students of color in your classroom means finding and presenting texts that they can see themselves in, that reflect their own lived experiences, whatever those may be. It's about helping them fill in all of the stories that are missing from their history textbooks—the stories that show strength and resilience and that challenge the dominant narrative. It's about going out of your way to make sure you are not the only person in front of them imparting knowledge. It is understanding that as a white educator teaching students of color you have limitations. Mitigate those limitations. Bring in people from outside when you can. You will not always be the best person for them to have hard conversations with. Recognizing that and providing them the space to explore those issues without you is crucial. Supporting them will sometimes mean stepping back, and that's okay.

But, and this is important, there is a flip side to the conversation about teaching while white. We cannot talk about the way we educate students of color without talking about the way in which we educate white students. We have to teach all students — especially our white students — to think critically about issues of privilege, race, justice, and oppression. We need to have hard conversations with our white students as much as we need to have them with students of color. Sharing everything that gets left out of history textbooks, having them read books by people who do not look like them and whose experiences do not reflect their own, helping them challenge stereotypes — all of these are crucial, but they're almost always left out of the discussion on educating in majority white districts and classrooms. But it is imperative that we do what we can to ensure our white students walk out of our classrooms with a perspective of the world that interrogates issues like institutional racism and structural oppression, as well as the tools they need to take action and challenge them.

Further, what we expect of our students we must also expect of ourselves. As white teachers, we have a responsibility to examine and think critically about race, justice, and our own privilege, and most importantly — how these play out in the classroom as teachers. As educators for social justice, we need to be having these conversations with our white colleagues, too. We need to push them just as much as we push ourselves, and as Melinda Anderson points out, this needs to start in our teacher education programs. Before we can ever hope to be good educators inside the classroom, we have to educate ourselves outside the classroom. And we cannot rely on teachers of color to be our source of that education. It is not their responsibility to teach us about issues of race, privilege, justice, and oppression. We have to do that. We have to find resources, do research, ask questions, and challenge our own assumptions. This is just the beginning of an extremely important conversation. It is our hope that this piece will spark a dialogue amongst white educators about how we can do better. Trust us, we understand how incredibly overwhelming these conversations can be, but our students deserve no less. Because, quite frankly, if we're not doing all of this, then we're not doing our jobs.

Further resources: Training Module: Developing Cultural Competency Among School Staff provided by Philly Tag At the Urban Teaching Matters Conference in New Jersey last Month hosted by the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, one of the workshops focused on being a white teacher in an urban area. The question at the center of the workshop was: how can white teachers effectively teach students of color? Below are some suggestions for white teachers looking to foster future discussions around the issues of race in the classroom:

- Need to move past personal concerns about being “labeled racist” and go to larger institutional discussions
- It's ok to screw up, but acknowledge the privilege you're entering the conversation with and don't pretend to be someone you're not in the conversation
- Colorblindness can be used as a shield for to acknowledging power and privilege\ not acknowledge systematic differences and oppression
- Wrestle with your own guilt of unearned privilege on your own time; face it and feel the guilt and then move on and use it to explore the structural implications behind norms
- Racism = racial prejudice + power, both structural and institutional
- Don't look at students in front of you as having deficits: deficit model as in “your life doesn't look like mine”
- Acknowledge your assumptions when entering the classroom
- Listen to learn, don't just listen to respond

Additionally, below are questions on critical multicultural education from the “Looking Within: Tackling injustice in pre-service education” at NYCORE (New York Collective of Radical Educators) Conference that could be helpful in fostering more discussions around the issues of race in the classroom:

1. How can we maintain our integrity and humanity as educators within a sociopolitical, historical, and cultural context of institutionalized oppression and hegemony that work to preserve unequal power structures in our society?
2. What are the possibilities for working toward equity and justice within an education system that reinforces and reproduces social inequalities?
3. In what ways are we complicit with systems of oppression? How do we contribute to or collude with oppressive practices in classrooms, schools, and the system at large?
4. In what ways are we engaged, individually and collectively, in the struggle against oppressive systems? How can we stay grounded and critically hopeful through our acts of resistance?
5. What historical and current examples of resistance, anti-oppression, and liberation exist within marginalized communities and how can these tools be utilized within our role as teachers?

Reading list:

1. *Raising Race Questions: Whiteness and Inquiry in Education* by Ali Michael
2. *Promoting Racial Literacy in Schools: Differences that Make a Difference* by Howard Carlton Stevenson, Jr.
3. *Multiplication is for White People: Raising Expectations for Other People's Children* by Lisa Delpit
4. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* by Lisa Delpit
5. *The Dream-Keepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* by Gloria Ladson-Billings
6. *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools* by Jeffrey M. Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell
7. *Disposable Youth, Racialized Memories, and the Culture of Cruelty* by Henry Giroux
8. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* by Bell Hooks
9. *The Latinization of U.S. Schools: Successful Teaching and Learning in Shifting Cultural Contexts* by Jason Irizarry
10. *Holler if You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students* by Gregory Michie
11. *This is Not a Test: A New Narrative on Race, Class and Education* by Jose Vilson
12. *Rethinking Multicultural Education: Teaching for Racial and Cultural Justice* by Wayne Au