Ready to Make a Difference, the Old-Fashioned Way

Debby Irving

Virtuous. Enthusiastic. Ready. If I had to pick three words to characterize the feelings I had when I chose to become a teacher in the Cambridge Public Schools, these would be the words.

After a number of years with two children in the Cambridge school system, its everyday happenings had become central to my life. The school community sparked curiosity and energy in me. I couldn’t seem to get enough of it. What drew me to this district rather than schools in general was the level of racial integration. Raised in an affluent white suburb, I didn’t want for my children the kind of racial or class isolation that I’d found so limiting in my own childhood. The racial diversity in the Cambridge schools intrigued me and drew me closer.

One cold December morning as I left my daughters’ school, I stopped in my tracks with the thought, “I wish I were a teacher.” Then, in mid-stride, it occurred to me, “Mid-life career change is a thing. I wonder what it would take to change careers?” One month later, I found myself as a teaching assistant at my daughters’ school, one of the city’s most successful and cherished elementary schools. My idea was to test the teaching waters before committing to the graduate education I’d need to qualify as a lead teacher.
As my start day neared, I imagined “My love of kids makes me a natural,” and “I’ll be able to make a real difference!” What I didn’t yet know was that although I was a “natural” with children who looked like me, this didn’t translate as I thought it would with children who did not look like me. I didn’t understand that loving kids would not be nearly enough and that my ideas about “making a difference” smacked of historical patterns about “saving” and “helping” and “fixing” that held in place the very issues I envisioned conquering. My sense of entitlement to help, and my assumption that I was equipped to do so, were manifestations of my lack of cultural competence. Although cultural competence wasn’t even a term in my white world, deep-seated ideas about being competent just by being white were.

I entered teaching fancying myself colorblind, and therefore able to love and teach each student equally. The truth, however, is that I did see color. In fact, race was very much on my mind. Despite a universally loved staff deeply committed to serving all children, I’d observed stark racial patterns emerge year after year at my daughters’ school. White parents flocked to school events, sat on various committees, and occupied the room-parent positions. Integrated kindergarteners who’d once held hands and bounced gleefully through school hallways slowly but surely got racially segregated into hierarchical reading and math groups. While my daughters’ friend groups grew whiter over the year, once-bright-eyed black and brown five-year-olds grew to ten-year-olds whose downcast eyes avoided mine. The principal’s bench, where recalcitrant students awaited their fate, disproportionately housed angry- or despondent-looking black boys. Meanwhile, the white kids disproportionally maintained their youthful exuberance while advancing through reading and math levels and assuming leadership roles in the school.

These racial observations mixed and mingled with subconscious racial ideas I’d unknowingly absorbed in childhood. In my 1960s suburban life, white was my normal, the entirety of my visual backdrop. Immersed in a world of white families, white teachers, white books and TV characters, white presidents, white doctors, white dolls, whiteness became so normal as to be invisible. Although I consciously noticed race only when a person of color appeared, the reality is I subconsciously noticed whiteness every minute of every day. Far from benign, my racial observations packed unspoken ideas about inherent human difference along skin color lines. Without knowing it, my childhood belief system developed around a complex, better-than/worse-than value scheme in which white people were smarter, more responsible, harder-working, safer, and superior human beings.

So when I thought to myself, “I’ll be able to make a difference,” it’s pretty clear who I had in mind. I wasn’t going into teaching to “make a difference” for the white kids. And I was far from colorblind. My unspoken assumption was that I, as the mother of two high-achieving white kids, had what it took to “help” the black and brown kids. The tragedy here is that despite my best intentions, without knowing my
own racial history or culture, I was destined to undermine the success of the very students I most wanted to “help.”

A crucial aspect of dominant white culture was, and continues to be, an unspoken agreement that black people are not just “non-white others;” black people are “troubled others,” and these troubles are somehow self-inflicted and/or biologically based. Integral to this silent narrative is a ubiquitous freedom-and-equality narrative: “Life, liberty, justice for all,” “level playing field,” and “land of the free.” Language like this exalts U.S. ideals while ignoring U.S. discriminatory policies and practices. This skewed messaging allowed me to quietly buy into distorted ideas about black people as less-than and go on to use these ideas to explain away not only the divergent educational outcomes and parent engagement I observed at school, but also the black/white wealth gap and those scary “inner city” neighborhoods. My hushed explanations included thoughts like “they must not care about education,” “they don’t know how to make and save money,” and “they have no regard for personal property.” Having grown up in a white world where a white-authored history and version of current events shaped my worldview, I was oblivious to the way black people told their own history. White history and narratives saturated not only my formal education but also information I soaked up through the media and my own white family’s stories. Amid this onslaught of one-sided history rumbled the unspoken understanding that talking about race was rude.

In that information void, I remained unaware that from the get-go, U.S. public and private programs and policies have disproportionally diverted resources toward white people, economically castrating communities of color, and then blaming them for their circumstances. Without knowing U.S. racial history, I couldn’t consider the kind of frustration and anger it might engender, which further undermined my aspirations to be that awesome, loving, colorblind, pied piper of a teacher I imagined I would be. Not only did I subconsciously judge people of color for their circumstances, I judged their attitudes and behaviors. I cannot stress enough how deep beneath the surface of my consciousness this was. Nor can I stress how damaging and perverse a mindset it is, because really, my approach to making a difference was not about discovering policies and practices that were differentially impacting students along color lines; rather, my approach was rooted in wanting to teach “those” kids to have more “appropriate” attitudes and behaviors. I wanted to teach them to think and act more like me, to be more white.

I had no idea of the history I was repeating. Although consciously I scoffed at historical phrases such as “taming the heathens” and “civilizing the savages,” subconsciously I was trapped in exactly that mindset. Beneath my colorblind fantasy, I was deeply invested in the white way as the right way. What’s more, I’d bought into ideas about women being the cultural torchbearers, both in the family and in society at large.
Without conscious memory of seeing the painting *American Progress*, depicting a white woman floating over the western plains, a bible tucked under her arm, I essentially swallowed whole the narrative she conveyed: the white woman’s role was to model how to be good, right, moral, and compliant. Choosing a career first in nonprofit management and later in elementary education fit right into the historically accepted role of white women doing society’s “helping” and “fixing” charity work for the destitute and the young. And, like past tamers and civilizers, my actions would mostly make me feel good about myself while disempowering those on whom I imposed my ill-conceived ideas about right and wrong.

As I entered the classroom with these unexamined ideas, I unknowingly fueled the very racial divide I imagined I would bridge. I congratulated black and brown students for simply completing an assignment while pushing white students to make corrections. I worked closely with black and brown students to adhere to rules yet excused white students’ rule-breaking with thoughts like, “gotta love her confidence” or “what spunk!” I bonded with the white parents who showed up at drop-off and parent-teacher conferences yet did little to connect with the parents of color who showed up less often, assuming their lack of engagement was due to external challenges such as work or transportation.
A key question I never asked myself was this: Is there anything about me that contributes to the outcome that parents or students of color engage more or less? What I didn't know was that the sight of white me could trigger historical feelings of mistrust and trauma for people of color. Nor did I understand that my cultural values around punctuality, efficiency, and independence were not similarly valued in all cultures. While I saw punctuality as a mark of ethical behavior, for instance, Black families may have seen my emphasis on punctuality as an indication that I value time more than I value human beings or relationships. By perceiving emotional restraint and conflict avoidance as a sign of good character combined with good rearing, I evaluated anger and agitation as character flaws combined with poor parenting, never as valuable feedback directed at me. Because my culture taught me to look for deficits in others, not to reflect on myself, I gathered evidence in support of black people's shortcomings, while never questioning my own.

Take Rosie, a first-generation Haitian girl I spent a year “helping” with all my white might. Rosie had a pattern of getting up in the middle of an assignment and walking to a classmate’s desk. With the best of intentions, my white colleagues and I believed this was a serious self-control issue and created a behavior plan that offered the incentive of earning stars by staying in her seat. My job was to implement it. Her response to my daily interceptions was to look devastated, return to her seat, and put her head on her desk, crushed that she'd failed again and too disheartened to focus on her schoolwork. For eight months, I blamed noncompliance as the source of her behavioral and academic troubles. Not once did I consider how my white cultural expectations could be playing a role.

Toward the end of the school year, a course I was taking helped me to wonder if a culture clash might be in play. As I learned that Haitian culture values group functionality over individual achievement, I began to get in touch with my own socialization around individualism and the lens it had given me in judging Rosie’s behavior. One day, after watching Rosie get up in the middle of a math problem, I refrained from intercepting her. Free from my demands, she walked to a classmate’s desk across the room and began rubbing her back. When I checked in with her later, she told me how she’d heard Kendall (who is white) crying. I’d been closer to Kendall’s desk and not heard a thing. This hit me like a thunderbolt. Rosie’s connectedness and compassion put into relief my lack of both. Did I have something to learn from Rosie and her culture?

As the course pushed me to consider how different cultures develop different sides of our human capacities, I wondered what sensibilities and impulses I might have developed in my culture. As I reconsidered the pity I’d felt when I learned Rosie shared a bed with five siblings and cousins, I reimagined the human connectedness she would also develop from that experience. I rethought the insistence I’d had years earlier that my daughters “have their own space,” each with her own bedroom. Had I set my own children up to thrive in the culture of individualism at the
expense of human connectedness? Had my own lifetime of individual orientation left me communally challenged?

One manifestation of my lack of connectedness was the way I engaged with the idea of diversity. I was drawn to racially integrated communities because they felt exciting to me. A more connected, culturally aware person might have wondered: How does this community feel having me become a part of it?

If I could redo one part of my life, I would have become more culturally aware and competent before entering the classroom. Without either quality, I stepped into the role of educator with the only cultural training I’d had, the one centered on white, patriarchal cultural norms and social roles. Although I’d experienced the oppressiveness of men dictating what was best for me, thinking less of my abilities, and labeling me too emotional as a woman, I turned around and imposed these very tendencies on students and families of color. My own ignorance about my culture both obfuscated my capacity to look for value in other cultures and allowed me to impose mine.

Reminding myself that I did not invent America’s racial caste system has helped me move quickly through feelings of guilt and defensiveness and onto the more productive feelings of mutual responsibility. Connecting with people and ideas with fearless vulnerability and humble curiosity has been the hardest and most rewarding endeavor of my life. How I wish I’d had the opportunity to cultivate this human capacity earlier. What I would give to turn back the clock and have decades of racial consciousness ahead of me. May young educators continue to unearth and expose the toxic ideology that reproduces racial inequity every day and leave the old-fashioned ways of denial and dominance where they belong, in the past.

### Engaging the Mind ★ Taking Action ★ Inspiring Excellence

**Assessing Your Exposure**

1) **STEREOTYPES**

**Write**

Set a timer for six minutes. During these six minutes, write every stereotype you’ve ever heard about each of the following groups. Keep going even if you think you’re done, even if it means repeating what you’ve written.

- Jews
- Muslims
- African Americans
- Latinx
- Native Americans
- Asian Americans
Reflect:

Are you surprised by what your mind holds?
Can you trace where you learned these stereotypes?
How do you think these ideas influence you?

2) SOCIAL ROLES

What gender roles were you exposed to in your childhood?

- Who worked in what kinds of jobs?
- Who were the primary caretakers in your home and the homes of extended family and friends?
- Who prepared meals?
- Who stayed home to take care of sick children?
- What were the genders of your childhood teachers?

What patterns do you notice?

What racial roles were you exposed to in your childhood? Write racial background next to each of the following:

- Family authority figures
- School teachers, principals, directors
- Extracurricular teachers, coaches, trainers
- Pediatrician, dentist, other medical caregivers
- Your five closest friends’ parents

What percentage of your childhood authority figures were white? How might this influence your ideas about leadership along racial lines?

3) CULTURAL NORMS

Which of these messages did you hear inside and/or outside your home?

- Don’t rock the boat.
- If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.
- Never discuss politics or religion in polite company.

How did your family navigate conflict?

- We didn’t. We avoided it.
- Shouting and disagreeing
- Silent anger and passive-aggressive behaviors
- Courageous conversations and reconciliation that resulted in increased connection

What messages did you receive about emotions and emotionally charged behaviors?

- Crying
- Anger
- Shouting
- Disagreement

What’s your friend and family conversational culture?

- When you think about sharing the name of this book with your closest friends and family, what feelings arise?
- What reactions do you anticipate from these important people in your life?
- What might be the consequences of sharing parts of this book with them?
- What might be the consequences of not sharing parts of this book with them?
As Debby writes in her chapter, she was not socialized to recognize or talk about race, or even to see racism. And while this is not the experience of all White people, or all White teachers, we know from the research on White racial socialization (Hamm, 2006; Bartoli et al., 2016) that many White people are taught to ignore race, to be colorblind, to see all their students as the same. Rarely are White teachers asked—or given the opportunity—to examine their own racial background as teachers. And yet teachers’ inability to recognize their own racialized assumptions and behavior impact the classroom and their practices. The chapters in this section, we hope, will help White teachers recognize this socialization in themselves—to the extent that it is there—and see the damage that it does in a classroom with Black boys. The following vignette by Howard Stevenson demonstrates what it looks like when a White teacher is absolutely color-conscious in her teaching. Howard’s drama teacher took so seriously the task of centralizing the lives and experiences of Black students that she risked her job to do so. And in so doing, she demonstrated that teaching Black boys well doesn’t just mean changing the curriculum and reducing one’s bias, it may also mean standing up to the community, to administrators, and to other teachers who believe (maybe even unconsciously) that Black students belong on the sidelines and periphery of our communities.

Vignette: Raisins in the Sun: White Teacher as a Force of Nature Buffering the Radiation of Racial Retaliation

Howard Stevenson

White teacher. Enthusiastic in body, mind, and spirit. In the subtlest of forms, a force of nature, she was. Energetic and relentless. A thirst for justice in every bone of her theatrical body—theater arts to be specific. Harriet Jeglum, a name made for drama, introduced me and many of my tenth-grade teenage friends at Cape Henlopen High School to the word *thespian*. I joined as soon as I knew that *thespian* meant “serious actor.” A club. A gang. A gang of actors who could change the world, we were. She was the ringleader and a delightful one at that—one many of us were more than happy to shapeshift ourselves and follow. She brought fun and life back to education. I remember her and regret that I have taken so long to remember her in print. It has been forty years since she carried the weight of racial discord, meant for me, so I could be in the center of the pedagogy we call school.

I’ve had many white teachers over the years. Mrs. Bounds, who was wonderful in second grade and who told my mother I would be somebody special. And then there was Mrs. Rust, who submitted my fourth-grade article on sea horses to the Sussex County newspaper, putting me on blast, famous for all who dared to question my professorial talents. And who could forget Ms. Phillips, who on the first
day of geometry class called me a nigger and told me I’d never amount to anything including failing the snap-quiz she was passing out. I got a B in that class because I hated her and she hated me. There was the crush I had on both Ms. Yancy and the algebra taught in eighth and ninth grades: my favorite subject, my favorite teacher, my first favorite dream life. Still, while all my white teachers varied in their influence on my development as a student learner, one changed the ground upon which I could question learning at its core.

Few white teachers I’ve had in my life could fathom the seriousness of the role or the importance of exercising their professional passion as a calling. In the Fall of 1976, Ms. Jeglum decided to do something never ever done before in the history of Cape Henlopen High or lower Delaware, I daresay. Every year, the responsibility of choosing the school play fell on her.

Choosing the senior play was no small feat. In southern Delaware and in many high school theaters across this country in 1976, theater directors were beholden and even smitten by the plays of their cultural upbringing, popular cultural expression, and social whiteness of that time. Nostalgia for the good ole’ days waxed heavy then, and the most common plays of record would be *Oklahoma* or *Hello, Dolly!* Musicals filled theaters with joy and happy times to distract us all from this country’s political turmoil and racial woes. Unfortunately, very few parts in these plays were written with Black teenage boys in mind, except lifting things and getting shot.

The senior play was the event of the year, the character statement of the school’s potential, hope, and energy. The play represented all that we as a school could be and become, and it didn’t matter if you weren’t in the performance. The play represented you whether you were a student, a teacher, family, or the maintenance worker. Ms. Jeglum alone could choose the play, and we had to contort ourselves into the characters of that choice and stake out multiple identity possibilities.

Needless to say, I was as shocked as any student, any teacher, any family, or maintenance worker when she chose *Raisin in the Sun*. Was I dreaming? Was she high? Was I in Delaware? *Raisin in the Sun*? Yes, oh my God, damn straight. What-the-? So many emotions and so much disagreement erupted in our school. There are only two white parts in Lorraine Hansberry’s wonderful script about a Black family living in Chicago and trying to make a future for themselves, and they were the bad guys.

We all tried out for the performance. Some were happy to be stagehands. My brother Bryan won the role of Walter and was masterful. Pearlina Waples played Mama with soulful gusto. I won the role of Willie Bobo because I could whine pitifully with the best of men who lose the family’s only resource for a financially
stable future. (To be honest, loud and pitifully regretful whining is universally annoying and requires no particular acting talent). You couldn't tell us nothin'! Not only did I not have to take a rocket ship into outer space to create a black identity from a white protagonist in the senior play, I was in it, and it was about me. I was in the center of the pedagogy. My people were in the center. My culture was in the center. Our language, our loss, our style, our anger. Protagonist didn't matter. Antagonist didn't matter. We all were heroes and heroines. We were not toting bales of cotton. We were thespians!

But, boy, the proverbial thespian shit hit the fan. Ms. Jeglum had to deal with the chorus of angry voices from White students, teachers, families, and maintenance workers about her decision. The onslaught of whiteness retaliation was her weight to carry. How could she? What was she doing? Was she high? No, she was not high. She might have been irresistible and immovable, but she was not high. Since she had arrived, Ms. Jeglum had been a social irritant in action through acting, not just words. She hadn't changed her views, stripes, or values. She didn't waste time just talking. She made school joyous again. The senior play was just the icing on the cake, the lemonade from the lemons, the tip of an iceberg I would represent for years to come.

Ms. Jeglum carried an unusually troublesome and ignoble burden. Yet, she protected us from that drama, and while compromise forced her to decide to have two senior plays that year—Raisin in the Sun and Hello, Dolly!, the racial blindness shipwreck had already taken place. There was no stopping us. We sold out the first showing so that a second show had to be scheduled. Our people, understanding the importance of this event, showed up in their Sunday best!

All students want their teachers to stand up for them, but black and brown students need them to stand up against the rejection that suggests we have no right to be in the center of the pedagogy. Not as a visitor. Not as a grateful orphan. But as the brightly shining stars we are. Like ozone protects us from the sun's radiation or a starship shields us from enemy photon torpedoes or a dam holds back the flood of racial retaliation. Placing us in the center with Raisin was noble enough. But buffering us from the retaliation was as honorable a gift as any teacher could give to Black and Brown students in the 1970s or the 1870s. It was more influential than a compliment or a nasty slur; more stimulating than being published or having a schoolboy crush; more powerful than talking about social justice. What white teachers need to know is that you must sacrifice your comfort if you want to be the tip of the iceberg.

A force of nature she was, we were, I am.
The following two chapters—“The State of the White Woman Teacher” by Julie Landsman and “Advancing the Success of Boys and Men of Color” by The Seven Centers—are intended to give you a global portrait of who White women and Black boys are in schools today. We have been careful—in these two chapters and in the rest of the book—to present statistics in a way that does not paint Black boys or their families and communities with a deficit lens. When we look at the state of education today, we want to see all the assets that Black boys, their families, and communities bring to their schools and to recognize that many of the failures we see are failures of a system. These two chapters are meant to provide readers with a picture of that system, a system which encompasses all the individual stories of triumph, challenge, loss, and struggle portrayed in greater personalized detail throughout the book. Julie Landsman, a former English teacher and a nationally renowned teacher-educator, gives both quantitative data on the demographics of White women teachers and qualitative data on common patterns that White women exhibit. The subsequent chapter, by The Seven Centers, gives us a sense of who Black boys are as a collective and how their experiences vary in smaller subgroups.
CHAPTER 8

What Does It Mean to Be a White Teacher?

Robin DiAngelo

I am a teacher-educator. On the first day of the semester, I pass out paper with the following questions and ask my students to write their anonymous reflections:

Discuss what it means to be part of your particular racial group(s). How racially diverse was your neighborhood(s) growing up? What messages have you received about race from your family, friends, schools, and neighborhoods about race? In other words, how has your race(s) shaped your life?

The following anonymous student response is representative of most I receive, both in content and length. Keep in mind that these students are in their junior and senior years of college and will be going on to be our nation's teachers:

My neighborhood in itself was not that diverse, however, much of my hometown is. I have always been taught to treat everyone no matter what their race is equally. Overall, I do not think race has shaped me much at all because it really doesn’t matter to me. When I look at someone, I do not look at the color of their skin but rather the person that they are.

I taught in an education program that is 97% white, and it was rare for me to have any students of color in my classes. Thus, this typical insistence that race doesn’t matter comes from white students sitting in an all-white classroom, who grew up
in primarily white neighborhoods and attended primarily white schools, and are currently being taught by a virtually all-white faculty (including me). The majority of white teachers have not lived near or attended school with people of color; have had few if any teachers, friends, family members, or authority figures of color; and do not interact with people of color in any direct or equal way in their personal lives or in their teacher preparation programs. Yet while most teacher education students live their lives in racial segregation, it is common for them to believe that racism is in the past, that segregation “just happens,” that everyone is the same and therefore they don’t see color, and that being white has no particular meaning.

While the following do not apply to every white person, they are well-documented white patterns that make it difficult for white people to understand racism as a system:

**Segregation**: Most white people live, grow, play, learn, love, work, and die primarily in racial segregation. Yet our society does not teach us to see this as a loss. Pause for a moment and consider the magnitude of this message: People lose nothing of value by not having cross-racial relationships. In fact, the whiter schools and neighborhoods are and the further away from Black people, the more likely they are to be seen as “good.” The implicit message is that there is no inherent value in the presence or perspectives of people of color. At the same time, society gives us constant negative messages about Black people, and males in particular. Many white teachers, not having grown up having authentic cross-racial relationships, come to fear Black males, sometimes consciously but most often unconsciously. Left unexamined, this fear manifests in their interactions.

Segregation not only demonstrates that race does indeed matter, but also makes it difficult to see the racial disparity between whites and Blacks that is measurable in every area of life. If white teachers insist that race is meaningless, they are left to explain racial disparity in ways that blame the victim, such as “they just don’t value education.”

**Individualism**: White people are taught to see themselves as individuals, rather than as part of a racial group. It follows, then, that they see themselves as racially objective and thus feel they can represent the universal human experience; their view is not tainted by race. People of color, on the other hand, who are not seen as individuals but as members of a racialized group, are not seen as objective on race and thus can only represent a subjective and racialized viewpoint. Seeing themselves as unracialized individuals, White people take umbrage when generalizations are made about them as a group. This enables them to ignore systemic racial patterns. This is reflected in popular White teacher narratives such as, “I don’t see color, I only see children.” While teachers don’t want to reduce students to race, they must never ignore the powerful role race plays in our society and in teacher perceptions of their students.
Racial arrogance: I was once asked to provide one-on-one mentoring for a White teacher who had made inappropriate racial comments to a black student. When the boy’s mother complained, the teacher became defensive, and the conflict escalated. The incident ended up in the newspaper, and potential legal action was discussed. I will call this teacher Ms. Smith. During one of our sessions, Ms. Smith told me about a colleague who recently had two black male students at her desk. She prefaced something she said to one of them with, “Boy, . . .” The student was clearly taken aback and asked, “Did you just call me boy?” The other student said it was OK; the teacher called all her students “boy.”

In relaying this story to me, Ms. Smith expressed the anger that she and her colleague felt about having to be “so careful” and not being able to “say anything anymore.” They perceived my intervention with Ms. Smith as a form of punishment and felt that because of this incident, Black boys were now “oversensitive” and complaining about racism where it did not exist. This is a familiar teacher narrative, and in this instance, it was rationalized based on the following: (1) The teacher called all her students “boy” and so the comment had nothing to do with race, and (2) One of the students didn’t have an issue with the comment, so the student who did was overreacting. The White teachers’ response illustrates several problematic dynamics:

- The teachers never considered that in not understanding the student’s reaction, they might be lacking in knowledge.
- The teachers did not demonstrate curiosity about the student’s perspective or why he might have taken offense. Nor did the teachers demonstrate concern about the student’s feelings.
- The teachers do not know their racial history.
- The teachers were not able to separate intentions from impact.
- In spite of the fact that Ms. Smith was so lacking in cross-racial skills and understanding that she was involved in a racial violation with potential legal repercussions, she remained confident that she was right and the student was wrong.
- Her colleague, aware that Ms. Smith was in serious trouble regarding a cross-racial incident, still maintained solidarity with her by validating their shared perspective and invalidating the student’s.
- The teachers used the student who excused the comment as proof that the other student was wrong; he was the “correct” student because he denied any racial implications.
- The teachers used this interaction as an opportunity to increase racial divides rather than as an opportunity to bridge them.
Racial belonging: White people enjoy a deeply internalized, largely unconscious sense of racial belonging in U.S. society. In virtually any situation or image deemed valuable in dominant society, Whites belong. In dominant society, interruption of racial belonging is rare and thus destabilizing and frightening to White people and usually avoided. Conversely, not belonging is conveyed to Black males through their lack of representation in the curriculum, textbooks, and role models, as well as the well-documented lower expectations that White teachers hold for them.

Constant messages that White people are more valuable: Living in a White dominant context, White people receive constant messages that they are better and more important than people of color. For example: White people are central in history textbooks, historical representations and perspectives, media, and advertising; our teachers, role-models, heroes, and heroines are usually White; everyday discourse on “good” neighborhoods and schools and who is in them favors Whiteness; popular TV shows are often centered around friendship circles that are all White; religious iconography depicts god, Adam and Eve, and other key figures as white. While you may explicitly reject the notion that one group is inherently better than another, you cannot avoid internalizing the message of White superiority, as it is ubiquitous in mainstream culture. Of course, Black boys are getting the opposite message; they are inferior and undeserving. These messages powerfully shape the interactions between White teachers and Black boys. If teachers can’t see these messages, or deny receiving them, they can’t resist their influence on interactions.

Many people are taught that they have to “walk a mile in someone else’s shoes” in order to understand the other’s perspective. But walking in someone else’s shoes is not truly possible. Although we can’t fully walk in others’ shoes, we can learn to draw connections, contrasts, and parallels between their experiences and our own. To do this, we must first begin with an understanding of our own worldview; considering those of others requires that we are able to consider our own.

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Racial Socialization Reflection

To begin the lifelong work of examining and challenging what is below the surface of your conscious racial awareness, work through these reflection questions. If they don’t match your specific background, adjust them accordingly.
At what point in your life were you aware that Black people existed? Most Black people recall a sense of “always having been” aware, while most White people recall being aware by at least age 5. Once you identify the earliest age at which you were aware of the existence of Black people, reflect on the following:

**NEIGHBORHOODS**

- Did your parents tell you race didn’t matter and everyone was equal? Why did they need to tell you this?
- If everyone was equal, why didn’t you live together?
- Where did Black people live? If they did not live in your neighborhood, why didn’t they? What kind of neighborhood did they live in?
- Were their neighborhoods considered “good” or “bad”? What made a neighborhood good or bad? What images did you associate with these other neighborhoods? What about sounds? What kind of activities did you think went on there? Where did your ideas come from? Were you encouraged to visit these neighborhoods, or were you discouraged from visiting these neighborhoods?

**SCHOOLS**

- Did you go to a “good” school? What makes a school good or bad?
- Who went to good schools? Who went to bad schools?
- If the schools in your area were racially segregated (as most schools in the United States are), why didn’t you attend school together? If this is because you lived in different neighborhoods, why did you live in different neighborhoods?
- Were “their” schools considered equal to, better than, or worse than yours? If you went to school together, did you all sit together in the cafeteria? If not, why not?
- Were the honors or advanced placement classes and the lower-track classes proportionately racially integrated? If not, why not?

**TEACHERS**

- When was the first time you had a White teacher? How often did this occur?
- When was the first time you had a Black teacher? How often did this occur?
- Why is it important to uncover our racial socialization and the messages we receive from schools?
- If your school was perceived as racially diverse, which races were more represented, and how did that impact the sense of value associated with the school? For example, if White and Asian heritage students were the primary racial groups in your school, your school was likely to be seen as better than a school with more representation from Black and Latinx students. What were you learning about race from these dynamics?

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1Latinx is used to avoid the gender-specific terms Latino/Latina.
As you reflect upon these questions, don’t stop at your first response; go one step further and think critically about your answers. Ask yourself how they reveal the deeply internalized framework through which you make racial meaning. In other words, we are taught to rationalize many of these patterns. Given this, we need to continually challenge our rationalizations in order to identify how they function. Do they lend themselves to accepting the racial status quo or to challenging it? The way we think about the world drives our actions upon it. For example, if my explanation for why my neighborhood was predominately White is because “people just naturally prefer to live with people who are most like themselves,” what further reflection on the impact of segregation on my identity is required of me? How does this explanation deny the decades of policies and practices that maintain racial segregation? Am I more or less likely to work to interrupt racial segregation in my own life and in my classroom? Am I more or less likely to build the cross-racial relationships that can lead to deeper self-knowledge and anti-racist action?

In conclusion, what does it mean to say that all people are equal but live in segregated groups? Our lived separation is a more powerful message because the separation is manifested in action, while inclusion is not. While these questions are challenging, this is the level at which we need to engage in self-awareness if we are going to challenge the unconscious reproduction of racism in the classroom.
Derrick and his best friend, Alvin, had been good students. Current ninth-graders in a public high school, they have been friends since Little League baseball. As two Black males (I use Black and African American interchangeably throughout this essay), they are conscientious about prejudgments and stereotypes that people may have of them. Not only have these Black males been good students, they are charismatic. People (adolescents and adults alike) are drawn to their personalities. They love to make their friends and teachers laugh. Derrick’s mother is a teacher, having taught in the school district where Derrick and Alvin attend for almost two decades. His father is a mechanic, and Derrick and his brother and sister have a good relationship with both parents.

Alvin’s mother was a nurse practitioner at a convalescent home. Recently, the facility closed, and she was out of a job. She has been working part-time at a local hospital, working about ten hours a week, but has not been able to secure full-time employment. Alvin’s father has been out of work for several years now due to a back injury he incurred on the job. Until recently, his family was moderately comfortable with his mother’s nursing income. While Alvin’s father receives disability benefits, he is not earning nearly as much as he earned when he was working, and
the medical bills and medicine he takes for his back financially stretch the family in serious ways. Alvin has two younger brothers, and while he wants to get a job to help the family, most employers won't hire him until he turns sixteen—still almost a year away.

Lately, Alvin’s teachers have noticed serious shifts in his academic performance as well as his attitude. He appears depressed and frustrated, and the change in his academic performance is quickly (and obviously) linked by his teachers to his social situation outside of school. Residents of Atlanta, Georgia, Alvin and his family are now living below the poverty line, with five total people in a household earning less than $28,410 a year (see Table 20.1 below).

**TABLE 20.1 2015 Poverty Guidelines From the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERSONS IN FAMILY</th>
<th>48 CONTIGUOUS STATES AND D.C.</th>
<th>ALASKA</th>
<th>HAWAII</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$11,770</td>
<td>$14,720</td>
<td>$13,550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>15,930</td>
<td>19,920</td>
<td>18,330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>20,090</td>
<td>25,120</td>
<td>23,110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>24,250</td>
<td>30,320</td>
<td>27,890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>28,410</td>
<td>35,520</td>
<td>32,670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>32,570</td>
<td>40,720</td>
<td>37,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>36,730</td>
<td>45,920</td>
<td>42,230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>40,890</td>
<td>51,120</td>
<td>47,010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For each additional person, add</td>
<td>4,160</td>
<td>5,200</td>
<td>4,780</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** Federal Register, 80 FR 3236, pp. 3236-3237

His teachers in math, science, social studies, English language arts, physical education, and band (all of whom identify as White) are keen to focus their attention on his financial situation. But what his White teachers seem not to understand is that their attention needs to be placed as well on his race and his gender. The fact that Alvin is Black and a Black male is not trivial by any means in the grand frame of centering his socioeconomic status. His teachers believe that these social constructions are irrelevant and certainly inconsequential to the ways in which they respond to the shifts in Alvin’s behavior. They believe that the focus should be on his family’s financial situation—period.
White Teachers’ Response

Excited, the White teachers in the school welcomed me as the professional development facilitator who was invited by the building principal to help them develop lessons and related experiences that responded to students living below the poverty line. Interestingly, some of the teachers assumed that there were some magic lessons that students living in poverty should experience. However, when I suggested that the teachers needed to consider race, gender, and poverty in their plans to be responsive to Alvin and similar students, the teachers were appalled. The issue for the teachers was about poverty, not about race! One teacher spoke on behalf of her colleagues to me as the professional development facilitator: “How dare you make this about race?! The problem with kids like Alvin is their lack of resources not their race!”

Alvin’s situation is not unique in his school and community. To the contrary, other students were grappling with the same or very similar issues, with parents losing their jobs. But the teachers wanted to focus on this situation with Alvin and not think seriously about broader structures and systems that needed to be in place to support other students as well as Alvin. And the teachers, with good intentions, wanted to focus mostly on addressing Alvin’s new situation living below the poverty line without attention to other matters. But it does matter that Alvin is Black and male in addition to now living below the poverty line.

Why Being Black Matters

Race is socially constructed. For as long as he can remember, Alvin has heard news reports, read articles in the newspaper and online, and overheard his teachers talk about a state of emergency for Black students and Black people. He understood that his being Black was an issue that others consistently tried to “fix” or change. Teachers should understand that racial messages Alvin received, such as those in the news media, consistently pointed out that Black male students were underachieving in comparison to their White counterparts. To be clear, while it is important to address and respond to all students living below the poverty line, White students’ experiences were likely analogous but not identical to the issues Alvin and other Black students faced (Ladson-Billings, 2000). White students might understand financial challenges, for instance, but they do not understand the breadth and depth of what it means to live as a Black person in a racist society. Thus, attempting to support Alvin academically without deeply interrogating what it means to be Black in school and society would lead to an incomplete set of supports. Both poverty and his race must be considered in a project aimed at supporting Alvin and students like him (Milner, 2015).
For instance, in schools, Black students are overrepresented in special education classes, and the research shows that many of these students are teacher-referred for defiant behavior. Black students are also underidentified as gifted, while their White counterparts are consistently being recommended for the most rigorous learning opportunities in school. Another example of the ways in which race influences student experiences concerns the fact that Black students are disproportionally referred to the office for disciplinary infractions. Research shows that teachers tend to refer Black students to the office for subjective infractions ("you are too loud" or "you are disrespectful") whereas White students are referred to the office for objective ones ("you are late for class" or "I saw you push that chair over.")(Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). Consequently, these Black students are suspended (in-school and outside of school) as well as expelled at alarmingly higher rates than White students. In this sense, it is essential that teachers understand that student experiences inside of school are shaped not only by their socio-economic status but also based on their race.

**Why Being Black and Male Matters**

What if, in addition to his family’s financial situation, Alvin is grappling with broader societal realities relating to his being Black and male? Indeed, some believe Black males are supposed to be masculine and emotionless, and it can be tough for them to show vulnerability. Although Alvin is struggling, he finds it difficult to show his vulnerability because he has to present himself in a particular kind of way among his peers. Thus, poverty, his race, and his gender (maleness) must be considered in a project aimed at supporting Alvin and students like him (Milner, 2015).

The timing of his mother's job loss is essential in the grand emphasis of teachers responding to Alvin and his family. In other words, we need to consider what else is happening in society when Alvin's mother loses her job. For instance, although unjustifiable and counterproductive, the shooting of five Dallas police officers by a Black man, Micah Xavier Johnson (age 25) of Mesquite, Texas, serves as a reminder to Black males about what criminal stereotype they embody with their presence. Although Alvin and Derrick (or their fellow family members or friends, for that matter) were not the actual shooters of the police officers, the image of a Black male committing the crimes can cause social and psychological strain. In what ways do those in society see Alvin when they imagine Micah?

Black males must also deal with the consistent shootings of and harm to unarmed Black male bodies by police including but not limited to the following:

- Amadou Diallo, 23, shot dead while unarmed, February 4, 1999
- Sean Bell, 23, shot dead while unarmed, November 25, 2006
Oscar Grant, 23, shot dead while unarmed, January 1, 2009
Trayvon Martin, 17, shot dead while unarmed, February 26, 2012
Jonathon Ferrell, 24, shot dead while unarmed, September 14, 2013
Michael Brown, 19, shot dead while unarmed, August 9, 2014

These incidents send a message to Black males about their worth and their place in society and school. Attempting to understand Alvin’s situation in poverty without understanding the time and place of his poverty status is insufficient (Milner, 2015). Put simply, Alvin is now living below the poverty line during a time when Black males are consistently being shot by police officers and vilified for crimes that they did not personally commit on police officers. As a middle-class student, Alvin did not have the same level of strain and stress on him about the financial challenges his family faced. His parents also were not as stressed about finances and could spend more time talking with Alvin about the shootings. This is not to say that his parents were not engaging Alvin with the shootings, but the additional financial pressures could make focusing on the shootings less of a priority for them. Moreover, when Alvin’s parents were making more money, they could provide additional services to support him, such as setting up appointments to meet with a counselor or psychologist if they believed those resources were needed for their son as he was grappling with these unfortunate situations.

In addition to negotiating societal realities as mentioned above, Black male students are also simply having to live in and through peer and youth culture in the twenty-first century.

**Understanding Race, Poverty, and Gender Intersectionality**

As I have conducted professional development with teachers across the United States, I am often met with resistance and downright disregard of the role and salience of race (and gender) in the work teachers do. During a recent professional development session, one elementary school teacher made her frustrations with me clear. In her words, “Our principal invited you here to talk to us about specific strategies to teach our poor children. I was devouring what you had to say—you were right on target—until you got to this race stuff. Race has nothing to do with how to teach my kids living in poverty. What does it matter? Really!” Frustrated, the teacher disengaged for the remainder of the professional development session, despite my efforts to draw her back into the professional development opportunity.
Offended, the teacher did not find the focus on race or the intersected nature of race, class, and gender relevant to understanding the needs of her students. What was particularly striking as I reflect on the teacher’s words and her unwillingness to address race was the privilege and power she exhibited in that moment to ignore what she found uncomfortable. A liberal but dangerous position that many teachers adopt is that issues of inequity are connected mostly to social class or poverty and that race does not matter any longer. They, in fact, believe we are postracial. Of course, poverty is important for teachers to consider in their practices, but poverty is only part of what is essential for teachers to consider in the complexity of meeting the needs of students who are experiencing the world like Alvin.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, teachers should be concerned about Alvin, but they should also be concerned about building practices that support other students as well. Building structures and systems to support all students does not mean that they treat all students the same (equally) but that they support and cultivate support and learning opportunities equitably, depending on the needs of each student. This means that what is appropriate to support one student living below the poverty line might be qualitatively different from what is necessary to support another. Centering issues of social class, race, and gender are critical dimensions of what is essential to build equitable practices. Focusing solely on Alvin and not broader challenges other students may be facing is problematic. My point is not that Alvin is not important. My point is that teachers sometimes try to become saviors—heroes and “she-ros”—to individual students without working to transform an entire system, structure, or situation for a broad range of students. For teachers in the classroom, this means that they develop instructional practices that are in fact responsive to a wider range of students. For instance, being responsive to a diverse range of students means that teachers should do the following:

1. **Immerse themselves in students’ life worlds**: Attempt to understand what it means to live in the world of their students through music, sport, film, and pop culture. This knowledge and understanding can enhance learning opportunities in the classroom.

2. **Reject deficit worldviews and ideologies**: Concentrate on the assets that students bring into the classroom and build on those assets in the learning contexts. Understand their own assets as teachers and use those as a foundation to bridge learning opportunities in the classrooms.
(3) **Understand equity in practice:** Understand the difference between *equality* and *equity,* and work to meet the needs of individual students while realizing that their curriculum and instructional practices may not be the exact same between and among all students.

(4) **Build and sustain relationships:** Understand that students need to get to know teachers, and teachers need to get to know their students. Maintaining some professional distance, teachers see their work as a family affair and view their students as their own.

(5) **Provide student entry into their life world:** Allow students to learn about themselves and make connections to show the commonalities that exist between students and teachers. Share their stories with their students and allow students to share theirs with them.

(6) **Deal with the (for)ever presence of race and culture:** See themselves and their students as racialized and cultural beings.

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**Engaging the Mind ★ Taking Action ★ Inspiring Excellence**

**Race and Class Reflection**

Because race is so difficult for many teachers to understand and reflect about, this activity is designed for teachers to reflect on their own race and racial background (also, see, Johnson, 2002).

Identify and write about your memories and thoughts about how you came to see yourself as a racial being with a particular class background. On a small scale, pose questions to your parents, teachers, and/or siblings about events, episodes, and moments that shape how you see yourself as an individual with a race and class. Mostly, you should rely on your own memories, thoughts, and reflections about how you came to understand, represent, and develop your racial and class awareness. Locate artifacts that help shape your story about your race and class, such as photos with family, friends, and classmates and other memorabilia. You might consider organizing your response around phases (early years, middle years, high school, college, adulthood).

Then consider how your race and class memories may influence your work as an educator.

Some guiding questions include:

(a) When did I start seeing myself as a person with a race and a class?

(b) What experiences and moments (in particular) have helped shape my racial and class awareness?

(c) How might my experiences as a racial being with a particular class background affect me as an educator?
Remember that chapter on White racial identity development? You may want to return to it as you read the following chapter. Dr. Eddie Moore Jr. is famous for his N!gga(er) word certification workshop, in which he helps participants confront a word that many of us have been taught to put out of our conscious minds. He takes readers through the workshop in the text here. We encourage you to pause as you read this chapter and participate in all the activities that Eddie puts forth as you read. His chapter is followed by a vignette by Marguerite W. Penick-Parks, a professor of education, who recounts her struggle with the N-word in her classroom as a young, inexperienced White teacher. Both Eddie’s chapter and Marguerite’s vignette close with practical suggestions for how to deal with the N-word as a White teacher.