CHAPTER 7

What If Being Called Racist Is the Beginning, Not the End, of the Conversation?

Elizabeth Denevi

It's the mid-1990s, and I'm a young White teacher with a few years under my belt. I take a long-term substitute position because a teacher quit, and the school needs someone right away. So, the high school class has been meeting for a few weeks, and they've just read a short story by William Faulkner. On my first day, I jump right in. I open the class by asking what the students' reactions were to the short stories so I can get a sense of where they are in their analysis of the form.

There are three Black boys in the class. One raises his hand and says, "I'm tired of reading books with the n-word in them. For my entire life in school, I've had to read this word over and over. It's not right, and I'm not going to discuss it anymore." He and the other two Black students get up and leave.

What would you do?

I doubled-down. I thought, 'Ah, these boys don't understand why it's important that we look at 'authentic' texts in English class. We cannot scrub the text of the original language. We must consider the historical context and teach the work of literature as an
artifact of its time, and certainly, Faulkner’s time in the South.” Blah, blah, blah-blah-blah. I brought in articles the next day for the students to read so that I could prove to them why it was important to talk about the n-word in English class.

I can sense your groan and/or gasp for breath. I feel it now as I write. I still get goosebumps when I tell the story, evoking the racial stress that still lives in my body (thank you, Dr. Howard Stevenson (2013), for teaching me how to cope with racial stress).

And what did those well-educated, young Black boys do? They got up and left the class again. Good for them. They were demonstrating a healthy resistance to racism that I could neither see nor understand.

And what did I do? I kept right on going. And they came back. And we muddled through. I never discussed it with them. What I would give for a time machine so I could go back and try to see it again more clearly. Twenty years later, the details are fuzzy. But I have never forgotten those young men and what I learned from them.

The sociocultural aspect of this classroom was invisible to me; I had no understanding of the cumulative effect of hearing these slurs in the classroom over and over. For me, it was an intellectual exercise. For these young men, it was an assault on their very being.

While I now know that the greatest predictor of academic success is the teacher’s expectation, I had not established any kind of relationship with these young men; thus, my explicit/implicit bias and privilege were in play. I still shudder at the power I had, but which I had no sense of. How terrifying, right? And how ordinary. I bet a lot of you could tell a similar story. And that’s what makes it all so systemic and illusory. It was just the water I was swimming in at the time.

Here’s my second example:

A few years later, I’m sitting in a parent-teacher conference. A Black mom sits across the table from me as we discuss her Black son. I have now been through my master’s program and have been asked to join a diversity committee. I would consider myself a “good” White person, now “thinking” about racism (it’s still an intellectual exercise for me). So, I’m particularly troubled by this young Black boy who “is not living up to his potential.” I feel that he can do more, but he’s not. I express my oh-so condescending concern as, “Look at all I’m doing. Why won’t your son meet me half way?” a sentiment I have felt and heard in schools more times than I can count.

And this mom looked at me and said in a calm voice, “I think you’re being racist toward my son.”

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And what did I do? I doubled-down again. I proceeded to explain to this mom all the ways that I certainly was not racist, how much I had worked with her son, given him extra time. I had not written him off as so many other teachers had done, telling me that I shouldn’t waste my time with him. Couldn’t she see how “good” I was? I defended myself, and my Whiteness, just as I had been taught to do by centuries of White superiority and White silence on this topic.

Are you cringing again? Years later, I shudder when I recall this conversation. And then I pose to you the central question of this article: What if being called racist was the beginning, not the end, of the conversation? What if, instead of a defensive rant about my intentions, I had taken this mom at her word? What if I considered that she might know her son’s experience better than I did? What if I had owned the outcome of my behavior and considered with her how my work with her son was perpetuating racial stereotypes and prejudice? Do you think that might have impacted her son’s experience in my class? In the school?

So here’s what I wish I had known before I started teaching and what I try to communicate to all teachers.

I want other White women to know (1) that they are White, (2) that it matters because as Parker Palmer (1998) notes, “We teach who we are,” (3) that their students see race either implicitly or explicitly, and (4) their failure to locate themselves as White and to talk about what that standpoint/position means is doing more harm than good. This is especially true for their White students.

When I first learned that I was white,¹ and I mean really White—not just the abstract concept that I was White—I was angry. Really, really mad.

And I was obnoxious about it. My husband often calls me the “white tornado,” but a bulldozer metaphor works as well. I was going to solve the problem of racism once and for all: White privilege at its best. The hardest piece for me was getting over being colorblind. I had been carefully taught not to see race or comment on it. It was a huge shift for me to even use the term “students of color” because for me to see and notice race meant that I was racist. For me to have identified as really White would have been tantamount to saying I was a KKK member. I had no examples of White people who had worked for social justice. I had no idea that for as long as there was slavery in the United States, there were White people working to end it. But nobody taught me about those people.

¹ This happened while I was reading four authors: Beverly Daniel Tatum, Janet Helms (1992), Ruth Frankenberg (1993), and Peggy McIntosh (1998). Thank you to Randolph Carter, an inspiring Black male educator and father of two Black boys, who first asked me the question that serves as the title for this article.
I have been profoundly impacted by the research of John Dovidio and his work to illuminate aversive racism. He clearly explains why being colorblind is so pernicious:

When Whites attempt to be colorblind, they tend to be self-focused and more oriented toward monitoring their own performance than toward learning about the particular needs and concerns of the person of color with whom they are interacting. In interracial interactions, this will impair the ability of people (particularly less explicitly prejudiced individuals) to engage in intimacy-building behaviors (Dovidio, Gaertner, Ufkes, Saguy, & Pearson, 2016, p. 27).

Those intimacy-building behaviors are what lead to strong, connected relationships in schools and to academic success. When White women teachers are worried about what they might say or that they might be called racist, they’re not paying attention to our students. Thus, they are not grounding their teaching in who they are, what they know, and what they bring to the table. And when they’re not doing that, they’re not being excellent teachers.

Along the way, these have been additional critical points of learning:

- **Difference as just difference, not deficit:**
  
The noticing of race is not racism. To understand that my students of color have a different experience is just that—different. Their experience is not a representation of deficit culture (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 71–88).

- **Diversity vs. multiculturalism:**
  
While diversity is quantitative, meaning it speaks to differences that can be measured and counted, multiculturalism speaks to the quality of life that diversity experiences in a school. These two terms are related and connected, but they are not synonyms. White teachers need not only to think about representation but also to consider classroom climate and culture.

- **Equality vs. equity:**
  
Equality means giving all students the same thing. Equity mandates that we give each student what he or she needs to be successful at school. Equity pedagogy signals that the playing field is not equal, thus including elements of power and privilege in our analysis of what students need (my gratitude to Paul Gorski (2013) for holding our feet to the fire on this topic).

- **Safety vs. comfort:**
  
White folks will often say they are unsafe during conversations around race when what they are generally referring to is a feeling of discomfort. We must be willing
to wade into this topic with our White colleagues as this “complaint” usually goes unchallenged in White circles. See Robin DiAngelo’s research for the best analysis I have seen of “white fragility” around topics of race (2011, p. 54–70).

- Intent vs. impact:
  While I cannot crawl inside your head and know your intentions, I can feel, hear, and see the outcome of your behavior. If we spent even half as much time owning and dealing with the outcomes of our behaviors as we do defending our intentions, we might create classrooms that are more equitable.

I am deeply indebted to a whole host of White educators who have dedicated their careers to illuminating Whiteness and the inequities created by racism. We have inherited a carefully crafted structure by which White people avoid, ignore, challenge, and collude in any way possible to avoid being seen as racist—better known as the “Scarlet R.” This kind of “white talk,” as Alice McIntyre (1997) describes it, keeps White teachers from really learning why their awareness of White identity is so critical to being an excellent teacher.

I’m also grateful to the educators of color whom I’ve had the privilege to teach alongside of, learn from, and speak with.

At first I struggled with the title of this book. I just wanted it to be “The Guide for White Women Who Teach.” Yet, if they had not proposed the title, I might not have remembered those Black boys I mis-taught. If White women can learn how whiteness impacts their teaching, it will certainly benefit Black boys. But most important, it will allow White women to be excellent teachers, educators who are wise to the fact that racial identity has, and will probably always, impact teaching and learning in profound ways.

To better get at what it really means to be White, take this challenge. For one week, try to include people’s racial identity each time you use their name. For example, “I had lunch with Amy, my white friend, and we . . .” Watch how people react. I couldn’t make it through seven days. By Day 4, White people (not people of color) were so challenging, I gave up. What would it mean to make it seven days? Thirty days? A year?
One of our goals in this book is to give you as many personal stories as we can, so that you have a deep and complex picture of who White women teachers are and who Black boy students are. Their experiences are so completely broad and diverse, and yet our collective experiences as members of those racialized and gendered groups impact us in so many common and predictable ways. The following vignette is by Eli Searce, a White woman married to another White woman, who is the mother by adoption of two Black children. Eli would have sworn that this unconscious bias thing we’re talking about here did not impact her. She didn’t see it in herself until she adopted her son, and she caught herself seeing—out of the metaphorical corner of her eye—how she actually looked at the behavior of Black boys differently from the behavior of White boys.

Vignette: New Understandings

Eli Searce

I am a White woman married to a White woman and together we are raising two African American children. After teaching in my private school for about six years, we fostered, then adopted, our daughter, a seven-year-old girl. Our son came to live with us, also through adoption, when he was two and half, about two years later.

I started teaching woodworking in a classroom after several years teaching multi-age levels in afterschool programs and summer camps. I thought of myself as bias-free especially with regard to race, especially Black folks. You know the story, “I have good friends who are Black.” And racial equality was a value I was raised on. During the adoption process, the social workers helped us see that the only children racially different from us whom we could support culturally were African American. We felt certain we had plenty of folks in our community who could help us with that piece of raising our children. We also live in a predominantly Black area of the city. We felt we were prime for raising Black children. I didn’t consciously think about race and teaching at all. I was sure I was unbiased when it came to race, believing racism was a conscious thing that didn’t apply to me. After all, I adopted Black children, right?

At about the time we were adopting my children, I started to recognize something while I was writing reports. It was disturbing. I was describing the behavior of a student in my class. The way I was phrasing it was less egregious than a student I had written about just a little while earlier, even though I was describing the same behavior. The first time I realized it, I justified it and continued. However, it didn’t happen just once. It happened almost every time I wrote reports. When I started looking at the differences in the children, I realized they were racially different. I
was being much harsher on my Black boys than my White boys. What a rude awakening! I then started to look at the behaviors and recognized I was definitely biased toward the White boys. I would justify their behavior as “not that big a deal.” With the African American children, I would make the problem out to be much more serious in my mind. I realized I had been doing this without consciousness even after welcoming my son into our home. Ouch. I was uncovering a bias that I had been sure I didn’t have.

This was the first of many new understandings I faced. Another was how triggered I was when black boys were acting “hood.” One year we had four fifth-grade boys of color who were trying on a kind of “street” behavior, mostly a visible body language of coolness. Many of the teaching team were also clearly triggered by this behavior. It felt like a challenge to authority conveying that school didn’t matter to them. Ours is a highly rigorous school, and this behavior felt challenging to what we stood for, high academics. Being a non-academic teacher, I was surprised by how this behavior still triggered me. It was clear that unconscious bias was at play for me.

Another realization was that I called out Black children more often when there was a disruption in class. All of these understandings shifted my attitudes and behaviors in class, but it was hard to admit it happened at all.

As my son has grown, I started to identify more with some of the Black boys, seeing my son in them. He is a very impulsive but good-hearted child. The impulsive Black boys I was teaching started to seem much different to me. In fact, one time I went to the classroom teacher about the misdeeds of a student who had lashed out in class at another student. I was trying to talk about the impulsiveness and to point out that he wasn’t malicious in his actions. The teacher jumped on my words and refused to hear me out. I felt she couldn’t see him as I was seeing him. To her, his impulsiveness was an intentional sign of disrespect. For me, it was so clearly a developmentally appropriate (albeit frustrating) behavior in a good-natured, well-meaning child.

My son has had his share of bias when it came to his schooling. But as many parents of Black boys know, it’s hard to pinpoint what is coming from bias and what is coming from other factors. I don’t want my son to look for reasons he is getting called out on his behavior, but he needs to know, too, that he will often be the one nailed first, in spite of how guilty he actually is.

In my behavior reports, I have adopted a descriptive style with no judgment or allowances. I frame it in terms of what kids do, not who they are. I had no idea I was biased racially, and it took having a black son to help me recognize it. Recognizing it was the first step; understanding and owning it was the next step. I have since done a great deal of education and reading and working with others around this and other unconscious biases. Now that I am aware of my biases, I have become a better teacher.
The following chapter by teacher-educator and scholar of Whiteness Robin DiAngelo demonstrates how so many of the patterns of behavior that White women exhibit are a direct result of a much larger system. This chapter helps coalesce our understanding of how White women teachers—a massive and infinitely diverse group of people—could have so many of the same common issues with Black boys—another massive and infinitely diverse group of people. We see how one’s placement in this system can shape one’s attitudes, assumptions, and patterns of behavior, without them asking for it, or even realizing it.