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First Person

How Can White Teachers Do Right by Students of Color?



By Justin Minkel

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We have a racial disconnect in American schools. [Fifty-one percent of the students in grades K-12 are children of color, yet 80 percent of their teachers are white.](#) White teachers like me have to love our students of color enough to learn how to teach them well.

Race in America often feels like a powder keg. As white teachers who realize how much we don't know about the lived experience of African-American, Asian-American, and Latino students, we can be reluctant to light a single match. My dad is a contractor who has built over 100 buildings. He told me once, "Everyone is afraid to start building because they're so worried about messing up. You just have to begin."

Here are five pieces of advice for white teachers willing to walk that path.

1. *Get started. Now.* In many classrooms, schools, and districts, we're doing so little to make school relevant for our students of color that almost anything is a step forward. A friend who teaches elementary art found an audio clip of an African-American artist narrating a lesson, and she noticed that her African-

American students were spellbound by his voice. One of those students said later, “He sounded like my dad.”

Our students of color are often starved for anything and anyone relevant to their identities and experiences. When I showed a YouTube clip of the Hamilton cast performing at the White House, my 1st graders were enraptured.

These small actions will feel insufficient, because they are. We need to be doing a lot more, from advocating for more teachers and administrators of color to enter the profession to confronting racism in our own schools, neighborhoods, and families. But almost every white teacher I know, myself included, could do a better job of taking small daily actions that make school more welcoming and resonant for our students of color.

2. *Get the right books into our students’ hands.* Children of color need books to be mirrors as well as windows. In most classrooms, [there aren’t enough of those mirrors](#). A survey of [children’s literature published in 2015](#) found that 73.3 percent of the books had a main character who was white, 12.5 percent featured a talking truck or animal, 7.6 percent had an African-American protagonist, and a scant 2.4 percent of the main characters featured were Latino. Still, the right books are out there—check out Scholastic’s [We Need Diverse Books](#) catalog for a start.

We need an abundance of those books in the classroom library our students browse during independent reading time. We need to feature them during read alouds. We need them in our students’ hands during guided reading. And while we can’t shy away from issues like the enslavement of Africans or the internment of Japanese-Americans, we can’t send the message that people of color are defined by oppression, either. At a focus group on equity last month, Afrika Afeni Mills of [BetterLesson](#) described her own children’s take on the books they had been reading in school: “It’s always about slavery and racism. Once in awhile, can’t we read about black kids just chillin’?”

3. *Bring in guest speakers of color.* The reality right now is that we don’t have enough teachers of color, [particularly black men](#). There are certain ways in which, no matter how much I love my students, I cannot be for them what a teacher of color could be. But the torrent of negative media images (a recent analysis found [50 percent of Latino characters on TV were depicted as criminals](#)) has an antidote. We have to provide our students a constant stream of writers, artists, mathematicians, scientists, engineers, and other competent and caring men and women of color to counter that poisonous programming.

When six first-generation college students, all Latino or African-American, came in to talk to my 2nd graders in small groups about what college is like, my students asked them great questions—“Did you miss your parents?” “How did you save up enough money for college?”—and the college students gave great answers. When a student’s mom came in during a unit on historical immigration to talk about why she had moved to the U.S. from Mexico, my 2nd graders immediately made the connection to earlier waves of European immigration through Ellis Island.

Find education videos or performances that feature people of color, too. Think how many children were shaped, like I was, by LeVar Burton of Reading Rainbow being the face and voice that introduced them to the first books they loved.

4. *When you hear other white people—including fellow teachers—make racist comments, speak up.* It’s OK

if your face turns red, you blurt out something that doesn't quite line up as a sentence, or it takes you 12 hours to come up with the line you wish you had said. The important thing is to make a little gash in that conversation so the comment does not go unnoticed or unchallenged.

Part of white privilege is the ability to speak against racism without being as quickly discounted by white people in power as people of color often are. We have an obligation to speak up.

5. *When you get the chance to learn from teachers of color, listen more than you talk.* There are only two teachers of color on my entire staff, despite a student population comprised of about 95 percent children of color. I desperately need opportunities like the one I had last month at the [National Teacher Leadership Conference](#) to hear from African-American and Latino educators on panels, in keynotes, and through long conversations after the formal sessions had ended for the day.

For white people to get better at meeting the needs of our students of color, we have to learn to talk less and listen more. We have to give more thought to what we want to *ask* teachers of color than what we want to share.

I continue to marvel at the patience, kindness, and generosity of spirit shown to me by African-American and Latino friends and colleagues. To learn from them, I have to remind myself to stop talking and instead listen deeply to their experiences, perspectives, and advice.

Doing Right By Every Child

None of us want to believe we're racist, yet many of us secretly worry that we are. We can't be afraid to shine a light on those shadowed reaches of our souls and examine the biases that shape our interactions with our students of color. We can't be afraid to ask a question of a colleague of color for fear we'll look foolish or clueless. We can't remain silent when white co-workers make racist remarks.

In our profession, love for our students is deeply intertwined with expertise in teaching. None of us could continue to put in the hours of reflection, preparation, and teaching it takes to become a skilled teacher without the motivation that drives us: to do right by every single child in our class. Let's make sure we include our students of color in that lifelong pursuit.

For a great resource with blunt questions and specific answers, check out [So You Want to Talk About Race](#) by Ijeoma Oluo. Thanks to Ricky Washington and 2014 Texas Teacher of the Year Monica Washington for recommending this book and for their editorial support.

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