

Teachers Need Support Unpacking White Privilege and Race
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I grew up on the south side of Columbus, Ohio. It was a time of bussing and the schools I attended through fourth grade were in the inner city. I heard the "N" word from my grandparents. At a young age, I had confusion about race. My best friend in elementary school was an African American boy named Ronnie. Yet, at my grandparents' house (where I spent most of my time), I heard negative things about black people. One time, I came out of the girl's bathroom stall at school and two black girls were staring at me and I used the "N" word. I didn't understand the meaning behind the word. I only knew that I heard it from my grandparents. I also got the crap beat out of me that day, which I deserved.

In fifth grade, we moved to a rural school where there was little diversity. No one liked me at this school. I cried myself to sleep for the first six months. I had a chip on my shoulder from growing up in the city and seeing fights weekly. Most of these kids at the new, rural school had attended school together since kindergarten and there were no real fights, at least in my opinion. My stepdad got me involved in basketball and that helped me to finally make friends. I never saw Ronnie again after moving. I graduated from this school, went to college, became a teacher, and eventually wound-up teaching at that same rural school I had attended.

College really opened my eyes and my mind to race, religion, and culture. I found myself searching for courses that helped me understand other cultures and races. When we moved in with my stepdad, I got a better understanding of racism and the proper way to behave. He and my mom were not racist like my grandparents. That hurts me to say. I love my grandparents, but I now can easily see the racism. I found out later in life that after my grandfather died my

grandma found a KKK white robe in the attic above his closet. My stomach still turns to think of this.

Returning to the rural, predominately white school of my youth felt like an opportunity to teach my students about people from different backgrounds and cultures. I spent a lot of my own money to create a diversity-rich sustained silent reading library in my room (after scouring the school library and coming up empty-handed). I discuss these books in detail during book talks and create opportunities in literature circles and Socratic seminars to incorporate open discussions about race. I did have some issues with students wanting to use the "N" word in class. I remember taking one young man out in the hall to discuss his use of the word. He told me his parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were farmers in this town and he would take over the farm and that this is how they had always spoken in their home. My response to him was I could not address what happened at home but in public, he had a responsibility to not be offensive. Then I tried to explain that, as a future business owner, he will have to know how to speak to people outside of our town and school in a respectful way. His reply was that he didn't plan on ever leaving this town. I'm not even sure I gave him the right advice. I ended up speaking to administration about the issue and giving detentions when the behavior continued, but I was disheartened that I was unable to shift his thinking.

I left this district after over a decade of working there. I then went to an online school in Ohio where over 80 percent of the student population is disadvantaged. Since the school served a high percentage of students experiencing poverty, I made the jump in my head that the majority of the students would be African American. I was wrong; Appalachian white students in poverty were the majority.

I've read books like *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in School* by Morris, *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind* by Jensen, and *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...and the rest of y'all too* by Emdin. I've taken PD courses and worked through simulations on poverty and homelessness. But these can only take me so far. Teachers need ongoing education and training to fill gaps in empathy and understanding across racial divides, but we also need relationships that will challenge our assumptions and beliefs. For our students, we can provide a safe and respectful place to push stereotyped thinking, through the lessons and resources we provide, voices we highlight, and the openness we model. One thing I've always done with my students is to admit I don't have all the answers, but I believe in the journey of learning from others.

These are some of the resources that have guided me on my virtual journey to challenge my own white privilege and to develop a more critical consciousness about race, culture, and religion.

- [Teaching Tolerance](#) is renowned website with ready-to-use units and lessons on race, religion, and culture. They also offer professional development and articles on these topics, as well as their own magazine that districts can purchase.
- Go to [TedEd](#) and type "race, religion, culture in schools" to find a wide array of helpful articles, presentations, and videos. This is one of my favorites: [Bridge the gaps between teachers and students with Roll Call](#).
- [Diversity Council](#), a Minnesota-based nonprofit focused on promoting equity across all types of diversity found in schools, offers many excellent lessons and articles, with instructional materials divided into elementary, middle, and high school grade levels, making it easier for educators to find appropriate materials.
- If you are an educator looking for a synthesis of research on equity in education, or an administrator or instructional coach wanting to find some research to help in a

presentation to your teachers, then "[Educational Inequality: Mapping Race, Class, and Gender](#)" is a great source to begin with.

- [The National Association for Gifted Children](#) offers ideas for more rigorous lessons on race in middle and secondary classrooms.

Although I think I've come a long way from the confusion over race I felt as a child, I know there is still a gap in my understanding, still more to learn. As a profession, teachers need ongoing education and training on how to fill these gaps, opportunities to build relationships across divides, and the courage to disrupt the practices that perpetuate racial inequities in school.

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