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Creating an Anti-Racist Classroom

By [Danielle Moss Lee](#)

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In an age where classroom teachers find themselves defending their profession and their results, the discussion of race in the classroom seems like one more opportunity for the finger-pointers who seek deeper understanding about the declining academic performance of all American students.

The truth is that, after decades of progress in closing the outcome gaps between white students and students of color, the disparities are just as profound today as they were in the 1950's when the landmark case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* was decided. In some school communities, like New York City, many poor and minority students are attending under-resourced schools that are not only separate and isolated, but that are also just as unequal as they were in the mid-20th century.

Even well-intentioned teachers can perpetuate the structural racism built into the fabric of our education system if they are not conscious and do not take active steps to address their own biases, and recognize how those biases can affect practice and decision-making. Recent explorations of the role of civil rights in educational disparity by the U.S. Department of Education revealed that in one school district, there were 149 suspensions and expulsions for every 100 black students compared with 32 for every 100 white students. Educators in that school district were shocked to learn that black students were treated more harshly even when the infractions were identical.

Moreover, teacher feedback on suspension forms for white students included notes that compassionately described extenuating circumstances that might have caused the behavior, i.e. "John's parents are going through a difficult divorce, and this may have affected his decision-making." Similar consideration was rarely documented for black students. To be sure, if you'd

asked the teachers in the district if race played a role in how they function in their schools, you would have gotten a resounding "No!" But the data tell a different story.

Recently, a colleague shared a story that occurred with her black male third grader. "One evening, I asked my son to bring me his completed homework so that I could sign off on it as I do every night. I noticed immediately that there were several questions marked 'extra credit' on one of his assignments that had all been left blank. I explained that I wouldn't consider the assignment complete until he'd answered all of the questions....to which he replied, 'Don't worry, Mom, my teacher said I don't have to answer those questions.'" As one of a few minority boys in his class, his mother was astonished that even black middle class families must find ways to navigate around the low expectations some may have of their students.

Luckily, there are things that classroom teachers can do to raise expectations for all of their students and to create a climate where difference isn't just tolerated but valued. Here's my Power List for practitioners:

1) Don't ignore race.

In a society where we are constantly bombarded with varying images of people from different backgrounds, the worst thing you can do is to pretend that race doesn't exist or doesn't matter. Find safe places to explore your own unspoken biases or, at the very least, to connect with other educators who are deeply committed in leveling the playing field for all kids. Additionally, if issues or ideas about race come up in your class, find positive language to acknowledge difference and to remind your students of all the ways they are similar.

2) Seek out established community organizations.

Many teachers who find themselves teaching in communities of color have a naive sense that there is no one in these neighborhoods working to help local families overcome the challenges that they face. If you're teaching in a community where people of your background are not in the majority, take some time to identify community assets and how to help your students and families access them. More often than not, you'll find great cultural, religious, educational and youth development organizations near your school that are eagerly looking for ways to connect their work to your students. Heightened community engagement can help break down barriers, dispel stereotypes and provide opportunities for your students to celebrate all the good things that grow out of the communities from which they come.

3) Remember that communities of color are not monolithic.

It's easy to forget that, despite the myopic perspectives on race we see in mass media, there really isn't one black or Latino community. All black and Latino students don't come from low-income, urban neighborhoods. All black and Latino college students aren't necessarily the first person in their families to complete college. I am a fourth generation college graduate. I was not the first person in my family to receive a graduate degree, either. At [Harlem Educational Activities Fund](#) (HEAF), we support black and Latino students whose families come from all over the globe. And each one of those students deserves to have his or her experiences honored and celebrated.

Know your class and invite parents to help broaden your understanding of student experiences, and to help you develop ways to build on those norms and traditions to create a sense of community in your classroom. When HEAF hosts a potluck celebration, we can count on food from as near as East Harlem and North Carolina, to as far away as Senegal and Ecuador. Our students love explaining their dishes and the related traditions. Our understanding of the community we operate in has enhanced the experience for everyone involved.

4) Read!

Authors like [Lisa Delpit](#) and [Kathleen Cushman](#) have done amazing work on how to teach students who don't look like you and how those students learn and thrive in their own words. The truth is that everyone who helped me along my educational pathway didn't look like me. It's important for all educators to develop a new level of consciousness toward how their everyday behaviors around race impact the ability of their students to thrive. Teachers are powerful change agents. Seek out resources, books and professional development opportunities to strengthen your capacity to effectively educate all of your students.

5) Self-awareness is the key.

The solution in your classroom begins with you. Don't be afraid to ask yourself the tough questions. Who are the kids you're most likely to punish or label? Who are the kids whose parents you call the most? Who receives your praise and how often? Who do you provide with positive reinforcement? How and to whom do you offer feedback on assignments aimed at helping to improve achievement? Do you have high expectations for all of your students? How do you express your high expectations? If you're uncomfortable with your answers to any of these questions, don't panic. Just know that you've got some work to do. Each small action can have a cumulative effect on leveling the playing field for all of our kids.