

Reflection Is Action: The Struggle for White Educators to Balance Internal and External Anti-racist Efforts

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Organization/Institution Affiliation

Abstract

This is a personal essay that will explore the different types of anti-racist initiatives that she, a white Jewish woman, observed in a high school in which she taught for ten years. A group of colleagues formed a white racial dialogue group based on self-reflection. Some members of the group later split and started their own group centered around action. A critical look at the efforts of these two groups will show the barriers and stumbling blocks that can develop when attempting to implement and maintain effective anti-racist initiatives in educational institutions. This essay will also discuss the importance of institutional support at the highest level for anti-racist and racial identity work to succeed. We all come to this anti-racist activism from different stages of psychological and political development. Sustaining these efforts requires a commitment to making shifts both internally and externally.

Keywords: Anti-racism; Educational Institution; Ethnicity; Racial identity; Political development; Psychological development; Jewish

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Creative Work and Self-Reflection

This essay will explore the barriers and stumbling blocks that occur in institutions when striving to implement and sustain effective antiracist initiatives. The essay will discuss the different types of antiracist efforts that I, a White Jewish woman, observed and was involved in at a high school where I taught English for 10 years. I will provide some background and context by focusing on the experiences with some of my colleagues as we formed a White racial identity dialogue group based on self-reflection. Several members of this group later decided to split and start their own group centered around action. It is important to look at the process of what happened during this school year with these different groups—self-reflection and action—because this dichotomy commonly occurs when attempting to do antiracist work in large institutions. Critics of the self-reflection group felt that not enough was being done because the group was focused on looking inward, while critics of the action group felt that the action-orientated initiatives ultimately reinforced the same racist structures they claimed could be dismantled. A critical look at these efforts will show the vital need to balance both internal self-reflection with external action. I will also argue the importance of institutional support for antiracism initiatives at the highest level in schools for any real change to occur. I also will elaborate on the intersection of my Jewish identity and my White identity in order to explore the tension between privilege and victimhood, and to examine how this tension affects the ways in which people enter into antiracist work at different places and how we bring with us multiple parts of who we are.

Before we started our White racial dialogue group, a few teachers (myself included) began to have informal conversations around issues of race in our school. Several of us teachers decided to lead a discussion of these observations at our Fall Institute Day as a professional development opportunity. About 30 people (teachers, staff, and administrators, both White and people of Color) came to our session. We started to talk about things people noticed in the building, such as the disproportionate number of detentions and suspensions among students of Color. We had also recently started to talk about White privilege, and began to notice the unearned advantages some had in the school. Some White colleagues were confused and said they didn't feel privileged. They didn't see people of Color as different; they saw them as the same as everyone else. A few people (both White and people of Color) challenged this view and explained why it was detrimental to think that way. Some people of Color shared personal stories and challenged the stereotypes that some Whites held of them. Listening to their stories at our session challenged the White people because they heard—many for the first time—about the racism the people of Color had experienced throughout their lives. It was a tense session, but we found that some White colleagues were open to being challenged and were eager to talk more about these issues of race and privilege.

After the Institute Day, we decided to form a discussion group of White colleagues devoted to honest self-inquiry around race. We were interested in exploring, discussing, and feeling our way through some difficult discussions of our own racial identities, privileges, and biases. We felt it was necessary to form this group

with White colleagues (instead of an interracial group) so that we could begin to explore our White racial identity without burdening the people of Color to educate or teach us. It is important to state, however, that there were other racial dialogue groups that formed during my 10 years at the school that involved White people and people of Color. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on what happened specifically among my White colleagues as we formed a discussion group.

About 15 of us met once a week in the morning for an hour before school started. Our meetings began with two-minute check-ins where we discussed questions we had been asking ourselves about race, changes we were seeing within ourselves, and places where we had blind spots. We agreed to challenge each other and to call each other out as needed. I was happy to make the time in a busy public school day to slow down and explore some of these complex issues. I have recognized the need to do this kind of self-reflection in community, to build trust with people who are committed to relying on the support of others so that we can help each other see our unconscious racism that still—despite our efforts to understand and dismantle it—wants daily to self-perpetuate. We also agreed not to get defensive when someone said something that hurt or that we might not have wanted to admit was true. I became familiar with Laurie Lippin (2004) who emphasizes the importance of self-examination as integral to antiracist work. In her essay, “Making Whiteness Visible,” she writes, “we need to start with ourselves, and find safe places to do our own work” (p. 129). Together, we read and discussed Beverly Tatum’s (2007) book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Specifically, we talked about the movement that Whites can make as we

begin to re-examine our place in the power structure. Tatum writes:

Not all Whites are actively racist. Many are passively racist. Some, though not enough, are actively antiracist. The relevant question is not whether all Whites are racist, but how we can move more White people from a position of active or passive racism to one of active antiracism? (p. 12)

This passage helped me to see my own passivity in the power structure, and how I was participating in a racist system. I knew that I wanted to move towards being actively antiracist, and I hoped that working together with other White colleagues to make some internal shifts in our thinking would help get us there.

In a large school, we had started to create a safe space to discuss race. As Whites, we talked about safety as a place where we didn’t feel judged to talk about race (as opposed to the different kind of safety from violence) and talked about how such safety was a privilege. In her *New York Times* op-ed piece, “The Seduction of Safety, on Campus and Beyond,” Roxane Gay (2015) discusses the privilege of safe places. She writes about not feeling safe physically when she was younger, and also about safety in her classroom. “Those who mock the idea of safe space are most likely the same people who are able to take safety for granted,” she writes, “that’s what makes discussions of safety and safe spaces so difficult. We are also talking about privilege. As with everything else in life, there is no equality when it comes to safety” (p. SR1). We recognized that while we couldn’t guarantee true safety in the sense of pure comfort, we could aim to create a place where we could learn and grow together.

We also discussed the larger issue of how to sustain a level of discomfort within the environment we had created so that we could continue to talk honestly. It seemed that we had learned that only when we change our own internal belief systems, could we start to take action. It was vital that this had to start with making shifts within ourselves.

Within my own classroom, I noticed more clearly the inequities that existed for students of Color. I saw how they were expected to adhere to a dominant White norm (even though the school was diverse, it still was modeled on White middle-class values, as are most public schools in the United States). I began to understand that the traditionally White curriculum represented a standard that students of Color were expected to embrace. I started to see how my White racial identity brought with it certain biases into the classroom. I hadn't yet realized that part of antiracist pedagogy is developing an understanding of pluralistic narratives, and recognizing that other genres are pitted against the White dominant standard by teaching token "othered" multicultural units. I was also unaware of Peggy McIntosh's (1990) essay, "Interactive Phases of Curricular and Personal Re-Vision with Regard to Race," in which she describes the different phases of teaching with an antiracist lens. Before my plunge into antiracism work, I had been teaching "single-system courses," where "students of all races are asked to imagine that the essential insights into human thought, labor, imagination, and care can all be found in the study of Caucasian people" (McIntosh, 1990, p. 180). Our group agreed with the importance of examining one's own way of thinking, so that a paradigm shift of how one sees the world can move from "single-system seeing" to "pluralized awareness" (p. 168), believing that "broadening racial or

ethnic understanding is ineffectual if it doesn't result in shifts of sensibility" (p. 168). These paradigm shifts must start with our own self-examination. Lippin (2004) argues, as well, that such rigorous self-reflection is vital for teachers:

As classroom teachers we need to realize how dangerous we are. Our consciousness or lack of it becomes a model for inquiring minds looking for something to emulate. . . . Without conscious intent, white teachers who have not interrogated their own identity issues perpetuate blindness to the impact of who we are on what and how we teach. . . . As members of the dominant group, we white teachers who haven't worked to counteract these powerful processes, suffer their infiltration into our teaching style. (p. 111)

Though in many ways I have just begun what will be the lifelong journey of understanding the implications and intersections of my White Jewish female identity, I knew, as I stood in front of the class, that I represented an on-going trauma for students of Color; I had been complicit in perpetuating institutional racism. I had expected students of Color to feel excited about reading stories that had no characters who looked like them, had no history that reflected theirs, and that had nothing remotely for them to attach to. I cringe even now as I write this, because I could draw a line from the moment that I understood what a microaggression was to the countless times I had committed them. And I started to understand why these students of Color—even students of Color who were wealthier than Whites—were performing at a lower academic level than White students.

We ran the early-morning cohort for most of the school year. I had started to notice some shifts in my teaching, from an increased sense of empathy for my students of Color, to a deeper understanding of institutional and structural racism. When I was required to teach a White text, I paired it with other pieces to complement and critique what we read. I talked with students about different kinds of racism they noticed (internalized and institutional, for example), and assigned them to bring in examples of each. I asked them questions about their racialized identity. Much of my growth was due to our weekly morning meetings. Though I had noticed some outward changes occurring in my teaching, our group was focused on internal self-reflection. We had not yet discussed how or when these discoveries within ourselves would manifest themselves outwardly into external action. Many of us developed a sense of comfort in sharing and learning about ourselves together with just each other.

Towards the end of the school year, however, a shift occurred within the group. Several expressed concerns about our focus on self-reflection and felt that we were fixating on the internal. They thought our weekly discussions were becoming too much like group therapy, and that we weren't doing anything for the school. At the time, I was concerned that they were struggling with their own discomfort of looking inward and I thought they simply didn't want to do it anymore. One colleague said, "Racism isn't about us. It's about helping kids of Color." Another colleague claimed that she didn't need to do her own work since she was just "doing this work for her students." Another colleague said he was "tired of talking about his Whiteness," and that he "didn't see what his being White had to do with solving racism." Another colleague said, "I don't need to do this work.

I did it all in the '70s." Though I had started to make some shifts in my teaching and in my interactions with people in the building, I sided with the colleagues committed to self-reflection. Some of them felt that they hadn't made the internal shifts needed to begin taking leadership roles within the school around racial awareness. "I'm just not ready to talk about it with my students," one colleague said, "How am I supposed to bring it up in class when I'm still struggling with my White privilege?" Another said that he felt his "racial identity work was still very private." Others said they weren't comfortable talking about it publicly in the school until "they received more training." The last few meetings we had as a group were spent arguing about whether the group should continue to focus on self-reflection or action. I accused the ones who wanted to act of using their White privilege and power to alter the path we were on. I felt that their "action" became a way for them to be in charge of the race initiatives within the school and to avoid doing their own personal racialized identity work.

As a result of our arguing, a divide occurred within the group. Those who wanted to keep doing the personal work would do so, and the people who wanted to take action would start their own group.

The new action group—consisting of, like the self-reflection group, White staff, teachers, and administrators—started to lead some initiatives that they felt were integral to dismantling racism within the school. Some started a group for girls of Color, where the girls were encouraged to act certain ways within the school. Those of us still in the self-reflection group felt this new initiative became about the girls being told to change instead of challenging the White dominant system that the girls were in. The girls were expected to conform to the same

White institution that was much of the cause of their acting out in the first place. They were being forced to be a part of “monocultural, single-system courses” instead of being empowered to “refuse to accept the projections onto them of deficit identity by the dominant culture,” and to “refuse monocultural messages about what they are” (McIntosh, 1990, p. 187). The group of girls of Color were told, for example, that they needed to control their temper and be more disciplined. Those of us who remained in the self-reflection group felt that this ideology reinforced the idea that they were deficient. We felt strongly that White antiracist educators who had started to make the personal shifts to identify such racist structures needed to help disrupt this system rather than telling the girls of Color that they needed to change. Some in the action group started a dialogue group for students wanting to talk about race. These same students were encouraged to tell their stories for the White adults in the building. When the students did so—understandably eager to be understood and seen—I was uncomfortable with what seemed to me as a parading and fetishizing of these students of Color. Other colleagues in the action group started a mentorship program where an adult in the building would adopt a student of Color. I was concerned that these colleagues who started the mentorship program were reinforcing the dominant narrative that people of Color are “less than” or need to be rescued and saved—playing the role of the “White savior.” Meetings held by the action group became logistical and planning meetings for their initiatives. Those of us who stayed in the self-reflection group continued to meet weekly for the rest of the school year, and we remained very critical of the action group.

The results of the group splitting were further complicated because the action group received institutional support for its initiatives while we did not. When our group asked for release time to meet during the school day, we were denied by an administrator who told us “we didn’t need to sit around and talk all day.” When I invited an administrator into my classroom to observe the discussions on racism and privilege that I had been facilitating with my students, he went to another administrator and asked him why I—a White woman—was talking about race so much in my class. He thought it was inappropriate for me to do so. He couldn’t understand why I felt it was my duty to make race central to my classroom—based on my efforts to be antiracist—so that the responsibility of maintaining an antiracist awareness in the classroom would not continue to fall only on people of Color. I felt that the high-level administrators were supporting only these initiatives from the action group and weren’t interested in making the internal shifts necessary for them to be able to recognize racist structures. They, too, felt that action alone was the best way to illustrate efforts at dismantling racism.

Though our self-reflection group continued to meet weekly for the rest of the school year, there was a sense of frustration that we weren’t supported by the administration. We weren’t sure how to keep moving forward and what this movement would look like. Many wondered what else we were supposed to do, but we all still felt hesitant about doing more outside of our weekly group. Although I understood the desire to act, my fear was that these actions would be done for the wrong reasons and without fully looking at the potential consequences. I, too, however, felt hesitant to move too quickly into action (recognizing now, years

later, that the ways I was changing were indeed a form of action). At the time, I was worried that this movement towards action would somehow mean that we would stop making internal shifts. I wasn't confident enough in myself to hold both beliefs as equally important and I didn't have the language or maturity to believe that both were possible as a symbiotic and simultaneous process. Ultimately, both groups stopped meeting. The efforts at "action" failed. The girls' group and the mentorship program stopped. Colleagues claimed that people were too busy to continue, and many of the students lost interest as well. Some of the consequences of these actions were that the students felt even more abandoned and isolated than before, despite the institutional support by the administration that these initiatives were given.

My conversations with other antiracist educators now often center on the tension we feel between knowing that these shifts take time and acknowledging the urgency that they demand. I have found, too, that students respond positively when they see their teachers struggling and grappling with ideas and issues as much as they do. Self-examination and action have become more interconnected for me. I know now that there are ways to act that are responsible, even for those new to antiracist work. None of us ever "arrive" to a place internally that is separate from the urgency of external action. One must embrace these as simultaneously essential. The effort to balance these is a common struggle for antiracist educators, but I wonder how the splitting into two groups might have been avoided. Perhaps we could have developed working definitions for the terms "action" and "self-reflection." We might have discussed more openly the frustration of sitting too much with the self, and the

dangers of acting too quickly. We could have tried to better understand why some felt that self-reflection and action had to be separate ideologies. Ultimately, if there was any way to anticipate that such a dichotomy might occur, perhaps we might have been better prepared to handle it and maybe things could have turned out differently.

Though I would not become familiar with Janet Helms's (1990) six stages of White racial identity until years later, I understand now how these stages provide a vocabulary for the different phases of development that both groups of White educators exhibited. Helms argues that White racial identity "consists of two processes, the abandonment of racism and the development of nonracist White identity" (p. 49). Helms's six stages are: Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-independence, Immersion/Emersion, and Autonomy. Looking back at the antiracist efforts throughout the school year I have described in this essay, I would claim that most of us—in both groups—got stuck in the second stage, Disintegration. This stage "implies conscious, though conflicted, acknowledgement of one's Whiteness" (p. 58). Feelings of extreme "emotional discomfort" (p. 58) can occur in this stage, along with "feelings of guilt, depression, helplessness, and anxiety" (p. 59). It is possible that the action group moved towards action prematurely to disguise their feelings of discomfort as we dug deeper into our White racial identities. And perhaps those of us in the self-reflection group hesitated to move forward, also due to the discomfort we felt. Helms's work is crucial here, as it gives us language to acknowledge the discomfort one feels when starting the process of White racial identity work, and to navigate these uncomfortable feelings instead of attempting to ignore them. "It seems reasonable," Helms writes, "to

speculate that the greatest discomfort occurs for those individuals whose attitudes, emotions and behaviors are not in harmony” (p. 66). This was the harmony both groups didn’t realize we even needed to achieve. We believed that attitudes and emotions existed in a separate sphere from behaviors and actions.

When people have asked me when I specifically became interested in antiracism and racial identity work, I look to a period much earlier, long before my colleagues and I started to talk about race and privilege informally at the school. I remember when I lived in Jerusalem, where I studied literature as a graduate student and where I fell in love with a Palestinian man. I realize now, 23 years later, that my relationship with Khalil was when I started to deepen an awareness of how my White identity and Jewish identity intersected. A White Jewish woman dating a Palestinian man in a land that privileges people like me over people like him had political implications far beyond what my 22-year-old mind could understand. As I fell in love with Khalil, I began to learn more about the Palestinian narrative on a systemic level. His family had been in Palestine for generations, and now was living life under Israel’s military occupation. The historical reality of Jewish persecution that I was taught growing up allowed me to ignore my privileges as a Jew: This privilege made it easy for me to claim citizenship while Palestinians were being stripped of theirs. I saw Khalil as a co-equal in my life, but my vision of him—my sincere sense of him—was skewed by my position in the power structure. I had no understanding of systemic institutional and structural oppression outside of having a sense of Jewish persecution. Even now, as I continue to deepen my antiracist activism—both here in the United States and with regards to Israel/Palestine—in many ways it

is Khalil’s story and Khalil’s family that is at the forefront of my internal and external work. The ultimate loss of Khalil—we broke up after a year—coincided with the loss of my own political innocence. I have been trying to deepen my understanding ever since.

I continue to try to identify places within myself where my Whiteness is hidden—like hiding behind my Jewish identity so that I don’t have to look at my White racial identity—and shifting my ability to think critically about myself and my place in the world. As I write this, I want to emphasize how easy it is to fail when trying to sustain any real awareness around these issues of race and White privilege. The process towards antiracism awareness isn’t linear; we ebb and flow in our efforts. I have come to understand that any kind of competitiveness and moral superiority among Whites over other Whites with regards to one’s antiracist work—I see this in the White antiracist communities I’m in—simply reinforces the racist systems already in place. I want to come into this work with compassion and empathy, and on most days, it’s just really hard to do.

I have since left the school, and currently work in a district where there is support from the highest level of the administration to do different kinds of antiracist work, and an awareness exists for the need to do it in community, both internally and externally (my final interview for the teaching position in this district consisted of talking about the dynamics that occurred between the two groups at my former school). While no institution is free of problems, the district I am in now is attempting to tackle these issues of race and equity at the highest level. Just last week I was in a race and equity meeting with teachers, staff, and administrators. One

colleague said he felt that there had been too much personal work and there needs to be more action from this group within the school. Another colleague said to him—reminding all of us—that talking is a form of action, and that these efforts are best implemented when they occur simultaneously, as a symbiotic process.

I am told that my former school has begun to examine how certain initiatives were handled, and new efforts are being made to look more closely at how to talk about racism and privilege. The district also hired a “director of equity,” and she has been streamlining the antiracist efforts in the

school, providing opportunities for faculty and staff to do antiracism work within the district. It remains vital for institutions—and all the people in multiple positions throughout the school—to make the internal shifts necessary to fully support meaningful antiracist efforts, and to develop the understanding that we cannot wait to act until we know enough. That day will never come. Since the machine of systemic racism penetrates us daily, it is all the more crucial to do what is necessary to change within ourselves so that we can act responsibly. Otherwise, we risk reproducing and perpetuating a racist force that already, by its own nature, attempts daily to pull us back into its system.

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