

## Antiracist Teaching Under Fire in Public Schools: A Case Study

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### Abstract

This paper will examine the case of a high school race-related curriculum controversy in which one white family effectively disrupted the teaching of a humanities course featuring a unit on race at a public high school, prompting the school district to amend the curriculum and later transfer its teacher to another school as a disciplinary measure, an action that effectively ended the race curriculum. This critical exploration seeks out specific points of dissonance in belief systems involved in the case, ultimately highlighting a disconnect between one of the district's stated strategic goals—to increase culturally responsive teaching in order to close achievement gaps by creating equitable educational opportunity for all students—and its actions with regard to the conflict between the teacher and the complaining family. The paper begins with a brief summary of the case and an overview of the pertinence of race and color-blind ideology, as well as an overview of critical race theory (CRT) as a tool to consider the case. A more detailed narrative and analysis of the case according to the conceptual framework of CRT follows, leading to recommendations for teachers and communities in terms of antiracist methods and curricula in schools.

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## Introduction: Case Context and Conceptual Groundwork

In February 2013, North End High School (NEHS) humanities teacher J. DiFranco travelled to Tucson, Arizona, for a family vacation during a four-day weekend. While there he saw a PBS episode of *Need to Know*, “Banned in Arizona,” featuring the controversial Mexican American Studies (MAS) curriculum in the Tucson school district that had been banned by then-Superintendent Tom Horne. Horne had accused MAS teachers of “encouraging students to adopt left-wing ideas and resent white people” (Planas, 2013), and the MAS curriculum had been officially shut down by the passage of HB-2281, “a law banning courses that promote the overthrow of the U.S. government, foster racial resentment, are designed for students of a particular ethnic group or that advocate ethnic solidarity” (Planas, 2013). Perceiving an opportunity to bring a thought-provoking issue to the attention of his humanities students, DiFranco showed clips of this episode in his classes upon his return.

Coincidentally, that afternoon DiFranco received a letter from the Superintendent of Pacific Northwest Public School District (PNWPS) informing DiFranco that he had created “an intimidating educational environment” while teaching a unit on race, and that the Race and Gender units of his course were to be suspended pending further review (Pacific Northwest Public Schools Superintendent, personal communication, February 14, 2013). These actions were the result of a formal complaint brought by the parents of a white student in DiFranco’s class. The parents alleged that, among other things, DiFranco had allowed “free and unlimited student expression of personal racial prejudice” and encouraged students to “vent

racial hatred without intervention” ([Pacific Northwest Public Schools], 2013, Exhibit 1). These accusations were reminiscent of those put forward by Horne in Arizona.

Students, alumni, teachers, and parents mobilized to reinstate the curriculum, with an unintended consequence: For allowing a petition in support of the race curriculum to be circulated by students in his classroom, DiFranco was served with an administrative transfer to a middle school as a punitive measure by district administration, an action that effectively ended the well-established race curriculum at North End High.

## Race and Racism

DiFranco’s course addressed many different aspects of social identity, emphasizing class, race, and gender. While acknowledging the relevance of intersectionality in human differences, the Race Unit isolated race as a central and significant issue to be explored over a three-month period. The salience of race has emerged as a formidable presence in intergroup relations in schools; indeed, race continues to affect all areas of public policy and social life. Bigler and Hughes (2009) call attention to consequences of poor race relations that disrupt normal functioning of social institutions, such as school closures due to racial hostilities. In contrast, the work of Braddock and Gonzalez (2010) shows that positive intergroup relations can lead to social cohesion, wherein individuals make social choices based on common interests rather than racial groups, therefore increasing the likelihood of productive collaboration. Recent scholarship has shown that fostering positive intergroup relations among adolescents and young adults of different races as they prepare to become full-fledged citizens is essential to building a

more equitable society (Carter, 2010). DiFranco's commitment to such action led him to develop the Race Unit in 2002 (J. DiFranco, personal communication, July 10, 2013).

Strategies such as promoting diversity of ideas in classroom climate and discussion, as well as exploring content that contains conflicting views, foster positive intergroup relations (Avery and Hahn, 2004). DiFranco was using these strategies when the race curriculum came under scrutiny. Despite the overwhelmingly positive student feedback regarding DiFranco's course during the ten years since its inception, one white family's discomfort with the Race Unit and the way it was being taught triggered institutional policies that derailed the curriculum and many of DiFranco's antiracist teaching strategies.

It is important to acknowledge the role of subtle racism as it contributes to tension and conflict in this case. Subtle racism, typically defined in contrast to overt racism as everyday attitudes embedded in societies where dominant groups have oppressed people of color, makes it possible for members of dominant groups to assert their privilege and status while maintaining the appearance of being open-minded. All forms of subtle racism have been identified in schools (Avery & Hahn, 2004; Cushner, 2004; Derman-Sparks, 2004; Lewis, 2001; Miel, 1967; Stephan, Renfro, & Stephan, 2004). Over the years, students of color participating in DiFranco's Race Unit regularly reported having experienced subtle racism at NEHS, including lack of ethnic and cultural diversity in the curriculum and in school staff; lack of understanding from white students; and discomfort from heightened expectations that they serve as representatives of their cultures.

## Color-Blindness

In the current context of race relations in the United States, color-blindness has been explored by scholars as a prevalent form of subtle racism (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2007 & 2010; Carr, 1997; Gallagher, 2003; Lewis, 2001). Carr (1997) argues that defenders of color-blind ideology have a common interest in maintaining the status quo wherein whites are the dominant cultural group, setting the standards to which all other groups must assimilate. It should be noted that according to Carr the term *racist* as traditionally defined "does not distinguish between the racism of the oppressor and the oppressed" (p. 155), leading to confusion among participants in conversations about race. "The term race keeps the focus on the biological factor that produces identification, or 'visibility.' This leads directly to the color-blind, assimilation solution to the race problem" (p. 156).

The use of the term *color-blind* in constitutional law dates back to Justice John Marshall Harlan's dissent in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, in which he wrote that "our Constitution is colorblind" (Harlan, as cited in O'Brien, 1998, p. 753). Harlan's words have been used by opponents of affirmative action to suggest that U.S. society has progressed beyond the need to recognize race; others have asserted that Harlan's claim has been detrimental to social justice efforts. For example: "Harlan's world-view caused him to fail to address pervasive prejudice against African-Americans by elevating formal equality and federalism concerns above social realities and remedial needs" (O'Brien, 1998, p. 752). Color-blindness has been promoted as a strategy for combating racism in social relations, with poor results. For example, Nobel (2012) cites studies showing that

“attempting to overcome prejudice by ignoring race is an ineffective strategy that—in many cases—only serves to perpetuate bias” (p. 1). The influence of color-blind ideology will be examined in the details of the NEHS situation explored below.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) is a suitable framework for examining this case, in that it affords opportunities to deconstruct and examine assumptions and contradictions in statements contained in the official investigation of DiFranco’s teaching and curriculum through a lens that considers the interests of people of color. CRT emerged out of legal scholarship of the 1970s as a critique of civil rights law, institutional racism, and color-blind ideology (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) outline several concepts that comprise the basic perspectives, methodology, and pedagogy of CRT, including (a) challenge to dominant ideology; (b) commitment to social justice; and (c) centrality of experiential knowledge. Extending and applying these basic principles to the field of education, these scholars assert that “critical race theory advances a strategy to foreground and account for the role of race and racism in education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of opposing or eliminating other forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin” (p. 25).

CRT is not only a lens but also a tool that is used to rectify social inequity. As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explain, CRT “not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but

transform it for the better” (p. 3). Given that DiFranco’s curriculum was clearly motivated toward such transformation, this case provides an appropriate context for applying CRT to education on several levels. The various facets of this exploration include relations among students in a predominantly white public school; relationships involving these students and teachers, parents and administrators; and intersections of these individuals and groups with institutional public policy. Additionally, DiFranco’s teaching and curriculum integrated personal storytelling with theoretical concepts such as racial identity and privilege to promote critical thinking in his students, instilling in them a desire to take action toward social change.

A feature of CRT particularly relevant to this case revolves around counternarratives of people of color as they attempt to disrupt the status quo of white privilege. DiFranco’s curriculum was reflective of “pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25). By incorporating narratives of people of color, underrepresented at NEHS, into his curriculum, and creating a space wherein such narratives were given importance, DiFranco was attempting to open a dialogue that would allow students to explore meaningful issues around race in their community.

### **Detailed Narrative and Analysis**

In August 2000, DiFranco and seven certificated teachers were hired as founding faculty at NEHS, a small, arts-focused alternative high school in the Pacific Northwest Public School district (PNWPS).

The inception of NEHS had been partly a district response to the demands of Parents Involved in Community Schools (PICS), a group of parents from the primarily white neighborhoods in the city. After white students of these neighborhoods were denied entrance into a popular, newly renovated school, PICS formed and subsequently sued PNWPS for discriminating against their children through the use of a “racial tiebreaker,” a school assignment policy intended to encourage racial integration throughout PNWPS. This suit was ultimately heard by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2006; in a 5-4 landmark ruling, *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. [Pacific Northwest Public] School District No. 1*, 551 U.S. 701 (2007), now known as the “PICS” decision, the Court declared it unconstitutional to use race as a criteria for school assignment. As the case was winding its way through the court system, NEHS opened in a neighborhood convenient to one of the PICS plaintiffs, and one of the children involved in this case enrolled at the newly founded school.

Throughout the school’s history, it has remained approximately 70 percent white, in stark contrast to the district average of 44 percent, and was even featured in Jonathan Kozol’s (2005) book, *Shame of the Nation* as a prime example of the resegregation of American schools. Color-blindness was invoked in the PICS decision to discredit the PNWPS tiebreaker policy. Mostly white, NEHS was a by-product of this decision.

In 2002, DiFranco created a course called Citizenship and Social Justice with NEHS’s history of racial privilege in mind. The course soon evolved to integrate curriculums of AP Language & Composition and American Government, with both language arts and social studies

units built around the thematic units of class, race, and gender. Students studied the rhetoric of texts such as Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” while exploring the state of poverty in their own communities and the racial identity development of Malcolm X. The class emphasized civic engagement with skills such as petitioning and writing to elected officials. NEHS students regularly participated in city and county public hearings, as well as legislative sessions in the state capitol. The course firmly established community engagement as part of the school culture; indeed, the course predated and influenced the school mission “to empower and inspire all students to positively impact [their] world” (About [North End High School], 2012).

In December 2012, DiFranco was in the midst of his tenth year teaching his course when he received an email requesting a meeting from the parents of one of his white students ([Pacific Northwest] Public Schools, 2013). The email seemed to be a response to certain lessons that had elicited strong emotions for some students in the class. In the email, these parents accused DiFranco of creating a classroom setting “characterized by personal attacks, racial stigmatization, emotional outbursts, moral intimidation, dehumanization, social polarization, and authoritarian indoctrination” ([Pacific Northwest] Public Schools, 2013). Given DiFranco’s commitment to antiracist, social justice teaching and the development of critical thinking skills in his students, the extreme nature of these accusations was the first indication of tension that would arise between his antiracist teaching and various misinterpretations of his methodology and course content by the complaining parents and the district.

One lesson that preceded the email from the complaining parents consisted of a panel of guest speakers of color, many of whom were graduate students in the School of Social Work at a local university. Seven panelists described their experiences with race and racism to DiFranco's students. Hearing his experiences reflected in those of the panelists, a student who identified as African American and as an Ethiopian immigrant shared his own experiences with racism in the discussion that followed. Many of the other students in the class were moved to tears by the pain in the stories that this student shared.

Critical race theory is easily applied to DiFranco's intentions for this lesson. DiFranco's pedagogical methodology reflects what Solorzano and Yosso (2002) describe as *counterstory*, "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)" (p. 32), particularly at the predominately white NEHS. By inviting individuals of color from the local community to speak about their experiences with racism in his class, DiFranco provided an opportunity for white students to witness firsthand the effects of racism in the lives of real people, introducing perspectives of which these students might otherwise not be aware, and an opportunity for students of color to have their experiences represented as part of the school curriculum.

The second lesson that sparked the initial parent email was co-designed by the panelists of color as an extension of the first lesson. In it, students shared their own racial identities in a large circle and then moved into affinity groups based on race. DiFranco's white students were instructed to discuss a series of questions regarding the role of white people in conversations about race; in order to ensure privacy and a safe

environment, they were invited to find a distinct location outside the classroom. The remaining students, who identified as "students of color," discussed what it was like to participate in class and be met with silence by their white peers, a situation reflected in the dynamics of the Race Unit at that point (J. DiFranco, personal communication, August 15, 2013). After meeting in affinity groups, the class regrouped in an inner-outer circle format. As with the previous lesson, the Ethiopian/African American student again shared his experiences with racism, this time joined by a few other students of color, and the other students were again emotionally moved, with emotions ranging from sadness to surprise.

This activity, also known as racial identity caucusing, is widely used in antiracist, social justice educational settings (Dias, Drew, & Gardiner, n.d.; Michael & Conger, 2009; Parsons & Ridley, 2012). The goal is to provide a safe space for participants to share stories and feelings with others who may have had similar experiences with racial identity, without the fear of offending someone of a different race. As Parsons and Ridley (2012) note, "the relationships students gain through race-based affinity groups enable them to feel less alone with their emotions and help them build a stronger sense of self" (introduction, para. 2). These researchers observe that although educators using this method report experiencing occasional pushback from white parents, "they also see the clear value for students" (Parsons & Ridley, 2012, *Learning from Experience*, para. 6).

DiFranco and the parents from whom he received the email agreed to meet on December 13. Prior to the meeting, another series of lessons occurred that would

eventually become part of the parents' first formal complaint against DiFranco. In these lessons, students discussed Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum's (1997) definition of racism as a system of advantage based on race. According to Tatum, groups that do not systematically benefit from racism may not be considered racist (Tatum, 1997). Tatum's conceptualization of racism echoes definitions posited by Lorde and Marable (as cited in Solozarno & Yosso, 2002). CRT scholars Solozarno and Yosso explain three important points embedded in these definitions, that "(a) one group deems itself superior to all others, (b) the group that is superior has the power to carry out racist behavior, and (c) racism benefits the superior group while negatively affecting other racial and/or ethnic groups" (p. 24). These scholars go on to explain that "racism is about institutional power, and people of color in the United States have never possessed this form of power" (p. 24).

In class, the white student whose parents filed the complaint against DiFranco expressed disapproval with the idea of racism being limited in practice to whites in the United States, because it meant that an African American student calling her an "ugly white girl"—an incident that had occurred when she was in the third grade at a mostly white private school—would not be considered racist. DiFranco actively validated the complainant's experience, expressing that she did not deserve to be treated that way and that it must have been very difficult. He also encouraged students to explore the perspective of the African American student. Where did they think the African American girl's anger was coming from? Several white students seemed to resist such an exploration.

The white student's story of being bullied by an African American peer in the

third grade constitutes a *majoritarian story*, or a story told from the perspective of the dominant (white) culture. Solozarno and Yosso (2002) explain that "a majoritarian story distorts and silences the experiences of people of color" (p. 29). The white student's story represents this student's efforts to place herself on an equal footing with people of color in terms of racial oppression. Though not a direct response to the stories previously shared by the immigrant student and other students of color in DiFranco's class, it nonetheless served to obfuscate equitable consideration of present and ongoing experiences of students of color.

The meeting between DiFranco and the complaining student's parents was filled with confrontational and contradictory language. A transcript of the meeting provides many significant points to which CRT may be applied to explore the escalating tension between DiFranco's antiracist teaching and the color-blind ideology invoked by the complaining parents. The first such point is the parents' assertion early on in the meeting that their concern was "not so much about the content of what's being taught in the course" ([Pacific Northwest] Public Schools, 2013, Exhibit 4, p. 3). The implied alternative is that their concerns were about DiFranco's methods rather than factual information conveyed in the curriculum. DiFranco told them that the goal of his methodology was to "create a safe space for people to share their experiences" ([Pacific Northwest] Public Schools, 2013, Exhibit 4, p. 6), which the parents countered with "it is very, very important that you not do anything to make people feel uncomfortable" ([Pacific Northwest] Public Schools, 2013, Exhibit 4, p. 6). The sticking point here is the implied comparison of discomfort of white students and students of color in classroom settings where white culture is dominant. Students of

color in DiFranco's class had reported feeling invisible and a lack of trust in white students who responded to their comments with silence during class discussions. This juxtaposition of one white student's isolated experiences of discomfort to the persistent discomfort experienced by students of color highlights misunderstandings that undergirded inequitable attitudes inherent in the case.

Throughout the meeting, the parents reiterated their belief that DiFranco should refrain from using racial terms in class. On two separate occasions the parents invoked color-blindness specifically as an official stance to be respected by DiFranco, first as district policy and then as legal precedent, telling him at one point, "you don't understand the law which says that it is color blind" ([Pacific Northwest] Public Schools, 2013, Exhibit 4, p. 15).

Shortly after the meeting, the parents filed a formal complaint against DiFranco in a five-page letter written in the format of a legal brief and addressed to the principal of NEHS. It invoked Superintendent Procedure 3207SP.A: Prohibition of Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying, accusing DiFranco of "creating a hostile and unsafe learning environment" for their child and her classmates, and included 20 allegations of wrongful actions by DiFranco, including:

*(a) Insisting that students discuss racism from a "personal, immediate, and local" perspective, encouraging finger-pointing discussions and allowing personal statements aimed at other students; (b) Allowing free and unlimited student expression of personal racial prejudice, and encouraging students to vent racial hatred without intervention; (c) Creating an emotionally charged*

*classroom environment where anger, fear, crying, shouting, and hostility dominated interactions with and among students; (d) Causing serious social divisions, confrontations, and disharmony among his students, in class and out; and (e) Creating a climate of fear in which students are not comfortable expressing dissent or feel they cannot defend themselves against racially motivated stigmatism. ([Pacific Northwest] Public Schools, 2013, Exhibit 1, p. 2)*

Given the extreme nature of the copious accusations contained in the parents' letter, it is not surprising that the district responded by launching an investigation. What is surprising is that the PNWPS investigator assigned to the case failed to interview any students in the class other than the complaining student. This oversight is in violation of procedure 3207SP.A, which states that in cases of harassment, intimidation, and bullying, "the investigation shall include, at a minimum ... interviews with other students or staff members who may have knowledge of the alleged incident" ([Pacific Northwest] Public Schools, 2012, p. 6). By neglecting to interview any witnesses to the lessons in question other than the teacher and the white student whose parents had filed the complaint, and additionally neglecting to interview people of color or other teachers familiar with DiFranco's work, voices of people of color and antiracist white allies were silenced in official documents of the case. The investigative report found that DiFranco "created an intimidating educational environment, and disrupted the educational environment at [North End High School]" ([Pacific Northwest] Public Schools, 2013, p. 9). In the context of the report, the bulk of which revolves around the complaining parents' color-blind

ideology, these assertions comprise a position that contradicts PNWPS's stated commitment to educational equity.

On February 19, DiFranco received a letter from the PNWPS Superintendent explaining his agreement with the investigative report's finding that DiFranco had created an intimidating educational environment. This letter revealed that NEHS's principal had made claims against DiFranco and his teaching during the investigation, despite the fact that she had never expressed such concerns directly to him, and in fact had consistently given him glowing praise in official evaluations during her years at NEHS (J. DiFranco, personal communication, August 15, 2013). This contradiction highlights a breakdown of institutional integrity in the case, and may partially account for the findings against DiFranco from an institutional standpoint.

The Superintendent's letter, characterized as a counseling letter and not a formal reprimand, informed DiFranco that the units in question must "cease immediately" until they had been reviewed by an ad hoc committee. It also said, "I do not, however, find that you engaged in this educational exercise to *intentionally* discriminate against any particular student" (PNWPS Superintendent, personal communication, February 14, 2013, emphasis added). The forceful suspension of the units, combined with the use of the word "intentionally" in this concluding statement, implies that the district perceived discriminatory material in the units of study rather than in DiFranco's intention in the design and execution of the activities and lessons. The dissonant feature of this part of the case is that DiFranco was initially found to have created an intimidating educational environment because of *the way he taught the course*, not because race was a central

concept. The complaining parents objected specifically to DiFranco's practice of requiring students to explore their own racial identity.

In addition to omitting or ignoring relevant perspectives in the investigation, PNWPS utilized other silencing strategies, first instructing DiFranco that he was prohibited from discussing the case with anyone while he was being investigated, and advising him that there was "no need to announce anything" to his classes regarding the suspension of the curriculum ([Executive Director of PNWPS Northwest Region], personal communication, February 21, 2013). This presented DiFranco with an untenable situation, since any mention of race in his classes would require him to tell students that they were not permitted to discuss race, a statement that would certainly cause confusion in the midst of a unit on race.

On February 25, after students in class raised issues of race and gender, DiFranco informed the class that such discussions were prohibited while the curriculum was being reviewed. Students of color and white students alike mobilized immediately of their own volition, holding lunch-time meetings, contacting the press, and initiating petitions of support. When the investigation was officially over and DiFranco was no longer compelled to refrain from discussing it, he joined democratic efforts to reinstate the curriculum in its entirety. The case of the suspended curriculum dominated public testimony at a packed school board meeting on March 6, 2013.

On March 8, the PNWPS Superintendent alerted the community that "the Race and Gender units of the course are to be reinstated" but with certain stipulations

(PNWPS Superintendent, personal communication, March 8, 2013). These injunctions included the banning of lessons based on Singleton and Linton's (2006) *Courageous Conversations*, a model that had been presented to all PNWPS staff in 2002 as part of an initiative to create a more culturally competent staff district wide. One of the core strategies of *Courageous Conversations* is for participants to speak their truth. Thus, the ban was yet another example of silencing strategies on the district's part.

The curriculum suspension and the Superintendent's counseling letter to DiFranco did not appease the complaining family, and they filed a second complaint against DiFranco—this time alleging retaliation. A second investigation ensued. Among their new list of charges, the complaining parents asserted that a petition—which came to DiFranco's classroom while the complaining student was present—constituted retaliation against their child on DiFranco's part. The investigator did not find DiFranco guilty of retaliation but again of creating an intimidating environment despite DiFranco's measures to protect the complainant: He stepped out of the room and asked the administrative secretary to supervise and make sure students were not pressured into signing anything. Since other teachers had allowed the petition to circulate during class time, he feared that denying entrance to the petitioners, all of whom he trusted to distribute the petition safely and respectfully, could have revealed that the complainant was in the room (J. DiFranco, personal communication, August 15, 2013). Nevertheless, the district used the issue of the petition to justify DiFranco's administrative transfer to a middle school, ending ten years of race studies at NEHS. This action comprises the ultimate silencing

of a key antiracist ally in the PNWPS district. Worse, the decision silenced all the voices of people of color included as part of the curriculum.

As with the curriculum suspension, mobilization efforts followed, this time to rescind the transfer. An activist group that had formed in response to the case, the Courageous Curriculum Coalition (CCC), sent a seven-page letter to district administrators containing detailed analyses of contradictions in the district's original investigation and interviews with dozens of students who expressed gratitude for the learning opportunities they had as a result of DiFranco's class:

*There was a deep feeling of understanding and acceptance and it seemed to create a lot of harmony within the student body ...*

*Overall I think every student was able to open their hearts and see what it means to be a minority in America. I could tell them what I dealt with, but before the class I was not able to say that. Now I can tell my white friends what I deal with all the time ...*

*I think it helped the community come together ...*

*Before the unit people were divided by friend groups since freshman year. After the race unit, I saw people hang out together who I'd never seen hang out before. (Courageous Curriculum Coalition, personal communication draft, August 27, 2013)*

Because the transfer was officially considered a "personnel matter" that

resulted from a Human Resources investigation, district leaders have consistently refused to discuss the case, yet another silencing maneuver. As of this writing, the district has not responded to the CCC letter. Nearly all communications urging the district to rescind the transfer, including multiple public testimonies at three different school board meetings, have been met with silence. In February 2014, in response to a City Council member's questions about the DiFranco case, the Superintendent avoided the question with the default district response: "That's a personnel issue." Under pressure, he asserted that the curriculum had been reinstated and that the class is still being taught at [North End High School] ([Pacific Northwest Urban Area] City Council, 2014), but the truth is that DiFranco's curriculum sits unused in his garage.

According to CRT scholars Solorzano and Yosso (2002), "critical race researchers acknowledge that educational institutions operate in contradictory ways, with their potential to oppress and marginalize coexisting with their potential to emancipate and empower" (p. 25). Nowhere is this more apparent in this case than in the language of PNWPS policies. Policy No. 0030: Ensuring Educational and Racial Equity, states that the district must "Ensure all students regardless of race or class graduate from [Pacific Northwest] Public Schools ready to succeed in a racially and culturally diverse local, national, and global community" ([Pacific Northwest] Public Schools, 2012, p. 1). Contrary to the sentiment of this directive, the implication of the district's actions in the NEHS case is that the color-blind ideology of one family must be protected at the expense of academic freedom and antiracist teaching strategies. Another section of Policy No. 0030 titled "Recognizing Diversity" states

that "the district shall provide materials and assessments that reflect the diversity of students and staff, and which are geared towards the understanding and appreciation of culture, class, language, ethnicity and other differences that contribute to the uniqueness of each student and staff member" ([Pacific Northwest] Public Schools, 2012, p. 3). The district's censure of DiFranco's teaching strategies directly defies this section of Policy No. 0030.

PNWPS central office administrators implicitly highlighted these contradictions in communications about this case. In his open letter regarding the findings of the curriculum review sent to all district staff and families, the Superintendent asserted the following:

Teaching social justice issues is an important part of academics for our students. These can often be difficult conversations, but they help prepare our students to become global citizens. I cannot stress enough how much I value curriculum on race and social justice. However, these are subjects that must be taught in ways that are age appropriate and non-threatening. (PNWPS Superintendent, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

The last sentence of the Superintendent's statement pinpoints the crux of this conflict. The question we now ask is, does asserting the salience of race and the existence of white privilege constitute threatening behavior and discrimination against white students?

## Conclusion

Any conclusions derived from this case must be tempered by acknowledgement of its limitations in terms of generalizability. A confluence of unique factors accompanied

the formal complaint that may have played a role in the final outcome. For one thing, the principal (who had earned extremely low scores on fairness in treatment of staff in the 2012-2013 annual climate survey) gave negative testimony about DiFranco's course in the initial investigation, contradicting the exclusively positive feedback in all three of her yearly evaluations of him. In addition, a former school board member told DiFranco that the Board has a "fiduciary responsibility" to avoid lawsuits. Given that the complaining family cited multiple state and federal law violations and formatted their complaint in the form of a legal brief, they seemed to be threatening legal action, which doubtless influenced the district's actions. Finally, in response to the banning of *Courageous Conversations*, DiFranco published an op-ed in the local newspaper arguing that racial dialogue is age-appropriate for high school seniors, which might have embarrassed the district and contributed to a harsher punishment.

At the same time, the case can be contextualized as yet another example of a nationwide trend in which the dominant racial group dictates curricular decisions in favor of silencing the experiences and histories of people of color. As previously mentioned, the Tucson Unified School District shut down the Mexican American Studies program despite its contributions to higher test scores for traditionally underserved students. In another example in 2012, the complaints of one family, presumably white, pulled the plug on a study of white privilege in an American Diversity course at Delavan-Darien High School in Wisconsin (*Huffington Post*, 2013). And in 2013, three white students at Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) filed a formal discrimination complaint against communications professor Shannon Gibney because of her lessons on structural

racism, resulting in a formal reprimand against Gibney by MCTC administration (Cottom, 2013). Such assaults on antiracist teaching are a major manifestation of racism in the twenty-first century.

Allegations of "intimidation" were employed successfully in both the Gibney and DiFranco cases. In the summer of 2013, former executive director of the local teachers' association reported to DiFranco that harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB) complaints have been on the rise in recent years. While criteria for HIB complaints vary from district to district and from state to state, in this urban district it appears that all a complainant must do is show that a person, lesson, or curriculum "substantially interferes with a student's education" ([Pacific Northwest] Public Schools, n.d.), one of four criteria of HIB according to PNWPS. In the DiFranco case, it is unclear what evidence besides the word of the complainant was needed to establish this interference; the family's only concrete evidence of disruption was a worksheet that clarified the difference between the concepts of race and ethnicity and explored the complexities of racial labels. The former SEA executive director confirmed to DiFranco that PNWPS does not employ a "reasonable person" standard when investigating HIB complaints; if such a tendency is commonplace, people accused of harassment, intimidation, and bullying are at a serious disadvantage in exonerating themselves. The DiFranco case sets a particularly dangerous precedent for educators engaged in similar work. Despite exclusively positive evaluations, AP test scores 24 points above the national average in 2013, and multiple awards from principals and the community, DiFranco and his course were shut down by one family's HIB complaint.

A number of programs similar to DiFranco's course have been shown to improve intergroup relations among middle school and secondary students, and have been especially effective in reaching white students. Stephan and Vogt (2004) include among these Facing History and Ourselves and A World of Difference, in which middle and high school students are encouraged to develop empathy with people who are different from themselves. Bettman and Friedman (2004), founders of the World of Difference Institute<sup>TM</sup>, explain that since the learning of prejudice is often passive or unconscious, "the process of 'unlearning' must be conscious (active), which often creates internal conflict in participants" (p. 83). Though such conflict may be uncomfortable, it can arouse cognitive dissonance stemming from invalidation of long-held beliefs, which can lead to changing attitudes and behaviors. Researchers examining Facing History and Ourselves, a similar program, concur. "A certain degree of conflict, or 'disequilibrium,' between one's own views, needs, and wishes and those of others is a necessary catalyst for psychosocial and moral growth" (Tollefson, Barr, & Strom, 2004, p. 105). These ideas are reflected in the comments of a current PNWPS teacher in an article about the NEHS case:

Unless we engage in sustained conversations about race, using a protocol that normalizes the discomfort, the social construction of race, we will remain stagnant in our efforts to dismantle systemic racism. High school students are well poised to engage in such discourse at the hands of a skilled teacher. ... I know from experience that the Courageous Conversations protocols are powerful and transformative for young and old alike. It takes courage to stay in the productive zone of disequilibrium long enough to make change. ([Public School

Teacher], personal communication, June 13, 2013)

Despite the documented benefits of such practices, color-blindness has been used in this case to shield a white family from this productive zone of disequilibrium. Bonilla-Silva (2007) argues that frames of color-blindness "form an impregnable yet elastic ideological wall that barricades whites off from America's racial reality" (p. 138), illuminating the rationale for the complaining parents to circumvent their critique of the content of DiFranco's course. By attacking his methodologies of naming racial categories in class discussions and asking students to self-identify in terms of race, the parents claimed to be protesting against discriminatory practices rather than a social justice curriculum. O'Brien (2013) belies this position in a close examination of DiFranco's pedagogy, noting that "conversations brought into the classroom provided white students an opportunity to own their privilege, connect this with their perceptions, and acknowledge the reality of racism in their own communities" (p. 5). O'Brien, a multiracial graduate student who was on the panel that presented to DiFranco's classes in December 2012, goes on to say that she was inspired by the teacher's intentional push to involve students in the deconstruction of their socialization. The introspection that occurred as a result of my involvement with [North End High School] provoked and reignited my passion for education. I questioned my own experience as a youth in the public school system, and wished that I had had a class like this one. My presence in the school reminded me that systems of education can be environments for social justice change but are often also institutions of oppression. ... To discontinue a curriculum based on a complaint of a student's discomfort legitimizes the very

power and privilege that is explored and deconstructed in [DiFranco]’s class. . . . Labeling the discomfort of the complainant as a violation of policy by naming it intimidation, bullying, or hostility, is to neglect the experience of students of color who are isolated and alienated on a regular basis because of the organizational structure and culture in school environments. (O’Brien, 2013, p. 14)

From the perspective of CRT, in order to resolve the tension between antiracist teaching and color-blind ideology, teachers who use antiracist curricula should be diligent about collecting data to document positive outcomes such as increased engagement, higher academic achievement, and decreased failure rates for students of color. If the academic benefits of social justice teaching are well documented, particularly with regards to the persistent opportunity gap, institutional leaders must recognize the potential for courses such as DiFranco’s to be models for dismantling institutional racism and improving the educational experience for all students.

At the institutional level, educators must have the explicit support of their administrators when teaching about issues of race. Administrators, in turn, must feel supported by the district in this work. DiFranco felt competent in engaging in challenging material after teaching the race curriculum over ten years and through seven changes of principals, but he might have benefitted from more outreach to this new principal to make sure she was aware of his activities and would support him if they were challenged. Discussing race sparks myriad responses—including moments of guilt and anger—and educators must feel secure that such responses will not jeopardize their careers. The challenge, however, is that HIB complaints, like the

one this white family filed, are viewed and investigated individually and not in the broader context of institutional racism. Thus, even well-intentioned policies like Ensuring Educational and Racial Equity provide little protection for antiracist teachers and curricula.

To protect antiracist curricula, teachers should implement affinity groups with extreme caution. While research exists to confirm its place in social justice educational contexts, it is too easy to misinterpret or distort. In DiFranco’s meeting with the complaining parents, they continually targeted the affinity-group lesson, referring to it as “segregation” and at one point saying, “We think it’s illegal. We think if you did that with the Jewish students, there would be a heyday. That [the local newspaper] would be very curious to hear it” ([Pacific Northwest] Public Schools, 2013, Exhibit 4, p. 7). For other lessons that could elicit similar pushback, proactive measures—letters home and explicit opt-out options—would further protect educators, though such measures introduce a double standard. Students of color studying potentially volatile content such as slavery, internment, and Indian removal generally do not receive such considerations. Evidently, to confront privilege in the current system one must continually cater the curriculum to the privileged.

If asserting the salience of race and racism is grounds for harassment, intimidation, and bullying complaints by white students, students of color may benefit from invoking the same HIB policies to counter white supremacy whenever their education is disrupted by subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—racism. Revealing the volume of such microaggressions is central to the CRT concern with action toward social transformation. While there is

a danger that HIB complaints filed by students of color would not be taken as seriously, publicity of such struggles could shine a light on the use—and misuse—of HIB complaints. Given the success of this one family's campaign in this urban district, it is reasonable to assume that families with similar ideologies and agendas will follow suit. Antiracist educators and communities working for racial justice must be ready.

Only a handful of district leaders know exactly why one family's complaint trumped the voices of so many. Until they come forward with the truth, the rest of us can only speculate. The author of a prominent education blog focusing on PNWPS issues echoes the confusion of many when she writes:

*I still find this [case] astonishing and can only believe there was some legal muscle from the family and a twitchy district that already lost on a race issue in court. But again, where's the will to do the right thing (as Spike Lee reminded us)? Because the right thing would have been a real discussion and not making [DiFranco] the fall guy. (Westbrook, 2014)*

The fact that the complaining parents successfully leveraged color-blind ideology against this teacher and his curriculum indicates that more work needs to be done at the institutional level to subvert damaging ideologies of whiteness and privilege.

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