

BEING HUMAN



Together

by Coty Raven Morris

Let me tell you a story about Ruby Bridges . . .

She was the first Black child to desegregate the all-White William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans on November 14, 1960. This is often where the retelling of this story ends. But if recent months have taught us anything, it is that there is more to her history than meets the eye, or in this case, even meets our textbooks. The now 65-year-old activist recalls the overly difficult entrance exam and how it was designed to limit the number of students who would be accepted. Even though Ruby was one of six who passed the exam, the other parents were fearful for their children's lives and chose not to have their children participate. On her first day of school, she sat in the principal's office while parents pulled their children out of school because they did not want them to be in the same building with a Black child. Barbara Henry was the only teacher willing to teach Ruby, so they worked together in a classroom alone for a year. When Ruby finally had recess time, she recalls asking another student why he and the other children would not play with her. His response was, "My mama said I couldn't because you are a [n-word]." When an interviewer asked Ruby Bridges if she was angered by the student's response, she explained that she wasn't because she was taught to listen to her elders and that's all that young boy had done.

From this perspective, I have come to realize the following:

1. The pressure Ruby was under to stand up for herself in that climate surely had to make her feel more terrified than brave.
2. Racism, like most things, is a taught trait. And thus, can be untaught.
3. Despite human effort, systems and organizations can also express prejudice.
4. The only way to break a cycle is to admit there is a cycle that needs breaking.

What if we stopped focusing on praising kids who persevere through microaggressions and circumstances and instead turn our attention to holding systems and ourselves accountable for the existence of these environments?

Lean into the Dissonance. With the global pandemics of COVID-19 and civil unrest, our nation has been struggling to find the words to process the events surrounding us. In these moments of uncertainty, we have spent more time reconnecting and practicing the lost art of communication. The time has come for us to take a hard look at how our classrooms and vocabulary serve to heal (or harm) our students.

Beauty can come from conflict. If it weren't for the aching dissonances of music, the resolving chords wouldn't have any magic! No one enjoys conflict, especially when it involves complex issues of race and culture. Ignoring the truth, however, will only amplify the problem. Instead, we should lean into the dissonance and learn how to effectively navigate difficult situations.

IT BEGINS WITHIN

To our students, programs, and schools, we are essential personnel. We have the ability to lift up all students, to celebrate their cultures, and empower them with skills not just to survive in this world but also to thrive! Here are a few things you can do to create classrooms where all students feel represented, respected, and loved:

Self-reflection: Start with self-examination of your identity and root out your own biases. Don't wait for someone to hold your hand through the journey. Search a specific topic or phrase that hits home with you and go from there. Our ways of thinking have been influenced by living in a society that values certain cultures over others (see *privilege*). Therefore, understanding and working through your own limitations and prejudices is the *most important thing* you can do. It will equip you to begin doing the actual work of fighting for racial justice.

Empathetic Listening: Instead of listening to understand, we often listen to respond, and this dynamic teaches the speaker that their words don't matter. When the conversation is about the culture of others and the issues in their community, this can be very damaging—especially when they've been receiving that message their whole lives. When we don't listen for understanding and instead listen to respond, we affirm the status quo that values certain experiences and identities over others and continues to take up space that should be occupied by and centered around other voices. Take a moment (or several) to soak in information from your students and colleagues of color. This act of empathy shows that you genuinely care about their opinion and point of

view. Remember, it isn't the job of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to teach others. It is imperative that those in positions of privilege seek out resources and not demand the emotional labor of others.

Build Rapport. On the first day of school, educators are bombarded with various types of greetings. "I didn't want to be in this class." "You're nothing like my last teacher." Though these alternatives to *hello* can be startling, don't let them drive your classroom momentum. Make your expectations of communication, procedures, and respect clear through practice. Instead of assuming a student is being rude, allow the situation to be a learning opportunity. Just like you teach the appropriate ways to get the director's attention or ask a question, model acceptable ways to greet each other. Explain why it is important to return materials to their original spots. If teaching virtually, establish conversation etiquette as well as ways students can communicate that things aren't going well for them today.

Recognize and celebrate your students' cultures through their life experience, not just your perception.

Build classroom expectations together so that if guidelines are not met, you have a starting point for a productive conversation. It's not "teacher vs. student" or "class vs. the offender." *It's everyone working toward healing.* If things get out of hand, take a breath before you call for discipline intervention. What if you simply started over? *Seriously.* I am a big fan of students arriving to class and being asked to wait in the hallway so we can review procedures. If they aren't meeting my expectations, I clearly have not explained them thoroughly. The cool thing about starting over is that it's really a clever *reset* button. Everyone has the opportunity to start on the right foot and make better choices for the entire ensemble without feeling like they are building a "crime sheet."

Color-cognizant, not colorblind: The days of "I don't see color" are over! Not recognizing the differences in our peers and students means that we don't acknowledge the beauty and pain that comes with a person's culture. By being color-cognizant, we can create opportunities for discussions and community-building that could lead to healthier environments in and outside the classroom.

Be open to learning: Make racial justice a normal part of your conversation. If you have questions or follow-up statements, be sure to respond nondefensively. Be aware of inequity and supremacy, and speak up when you see it. Don't be afraid to call out microaggressions, and lend an additional perspective in conversations that leave out issues of equity. Challenge *colorblind* remarks made by students *and* adults!

Be active! Expand your network to include educators of color and engage with them so you can hear their perspectives. Find ways to support them by sharing and talking about their work within your sphere of influence. Recognize and celebrate your students' cultures through their life experience, not just your perception. Resist the urge to center yourself and rush to *do something* when you're still in the beginning stages of learning about social justice.

Give yourself some grace as you navigate these uncharted waters.

While difficult to do with close friends and family, your opinion means the most in those areas, so it's imperative to speak up.

WHAT CAN I DO RIGHT NOW?

We might feel the desire to return to normal, but it's imperative that we understand *normal* wasn't working for everyone. This is the perfect time to reevaluate your syllabus, curriculum, and lesson plans. The uncertainty of schedules gives the opportunity for flexibility and change. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are my students' identities portrayed in the content I teach?
- Does my teaching style or content center on limited voices?
- If the demographic of my classroom is not diverse, are my students still learning about a wide range of identities?

There's a lot of power in simply asking your students if they feel represented, appreciated, and valued. Sometimes all it takes is creating a space where students know they can be honest with you.

Everyone has a different set of heroes and motivators. When asked about who inspires my philosophies the most, I often refer to my grandmother. Can you imagine a classroom where next to an image of Mozart, there was a photograph of a student's grandmother? Someone who told them stories, taught them lessons, inspired them to be great? Whether it's a composer wall, a mural of motivators, or solfège symbols in different skin pigments, I challenge you to add diverse symbols of greatness to your classroom decor and teach with them!

Comb through your essential knowledge and skills and see where there are discrepancies and opportunities for modifications. Just because you've always programmed a certain piece at a certain time of year doesn't mean that you can't change. The key to being a great educator is being humble enough to also be flexible. Let's build a habit and stamina for score study, curriculum creation, and research (whether academic or in conversations with others).

OTHER TIPS

- Expand on your classroom traditions: sing *Happy Birthday* in different languages, teach the works and stories of BIPOC, use music examples that invite conversation and connections to real life experiences.
- Discuss the difference between *appropriation* and *appreciation*.
- Build a list of diverse repertoire for future lessons and performances and teach the history thoroughly.
- Make the effort to say your students' names correctly. Don't give them nicknames because it's easier for you to pronounce.
- Normalize difficult conversations in your classroom by modeling healthy dialogue.
- Discover your role(s) in the social change ecosystem (great activity for self-reflection and with students).
- Advocate for continuous *equity* and *inclusion* training in your schools (follow-through is key)!

BEING HUMAN TOGETHER

So what can we do for the Rubys in our classrooms? We can't make our students tell us their whole story, but we can create spaces where they can see themselves evolving. Taking the time to reflect on empathy and work for equality is the work we must all accept. Remember, no one is perfect! Reach out to colleagues for suggestions and invite your students in on the conversation. Give yourself some grace as you navigate these uncharted waters. The first step is always the hardest, but you have already taken it by being here and reading this.

Lastly, always remember, *love* is a verb. This is a journey we must all go on. Don't worry, you won't be alone. Welcome to the conversation!



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Essential Vocabulary

Privilege: Unearned advantages that are valued but restricted to certain groups. The societal scale is not balanced and only certain people benefit.

Ethnicity: A characterization of people based on having shared culture (e.g., language, food, music, dress, values, and beliefs) related to common ancestry and shared history.

Culture: The belief systems and value orientations that influence customs, norms, practices, and social institutions.

Race: The societal construction and categorization of people based on perceived shared physical traits that result in the maintenance of a sociopolitical hierarchy.

Microaggressions: The everyday, subtle, intentional—and often unintentional—interactions or behaviors that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalized groups.

Empathy: The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present, without having those feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.

Racism: The belief in the superiority of one's own race and inferiority of another race and the power to take individual or collective action against the racial group(s) deemed as inferior.

Cultural Appropriation: Also, *extractivism*. Dialoguing with a story that is not your own, taking parts and making it work. A form of plagiarism where characteristics are reabsorbed and falsified. Appreciation, instead, is when people share mutually with each other. Cultural exchange lacks a systemic power dynamic.

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