

## CHAPTER 15

---

# Can I Do This if I'm White?

How White Educators Can Be the  
Teachers Black Girl Students Deserve

*Ali Michael*

It's essential to my life and work now that I talk about race and racism, confront racist policies, and challenge racially disparate outcomes. But I didn't grow up this way. I am white and I grew up in a predominantly white town, where I was taught—through the shared practices around me—to imagine I was acting in a color-blind fashion by staying silent about race and treating everybody the same. When I got to college, I learned that such imagined color-blindness only serves to reinforce racist structures, because it makes it impossible to talk about or challenge those structures. Even with that knowledge, however, I was so uncomfortable talking about race that I imagined I was biologically wired in a way that made such conversations impossible for me. In an African American literature course, when I opened my mouth, I would stutter and stumble, confusing my terms and hesitating out of fear of saying something offensive. I would stop suddenly and let my voice trail off, hoping someone would come to my rescue. I even believed for a time that talking about race and strategizing about racism was something people of color were born able to do. I would never be able to do it—because I'm white.

Time and education and experience would change this for me, of course. But those transitional times gave me clear insight into the difficulty many white people have talking about race. Here, I hope to convince white educators that bridging their discomfort is essential. It's far better to start and stumble and grow than to hide silently in privilege.

How do white people get beyond awkward stumbling fear and build the skills necessary for racial competency? We learn with practice. We learn by trying, making mistakes, taking feedback, and keeping at it. This revelation was offered to me in graduate school when my mentor, Dr. Howard Stevenson, a professor of urban education at the University of Pennsylvania, stated directly: Racial proficiency is a skills-based competency—a set of skills one must gain through practice (Stevenson, 2014).

So what are those skills? In an attempt to break down some of the component parts of racial competency—sometimes called racial literacy (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015; Stevenson, 2014)—I organize my thinking around the racial competency framework for training counselors (Sue & Torino, 2005), which involves four main components: knowledge, self-awareness, skills, and action. Here, I delineate some of the specific knowledge, self-awareness, skills, and action that white educators can engage in to build their racial competency for serving Black girls in school.

Overall, it's important that white educators understand that we cannot teach Black girls well if we cannot even say the word Black; if we don't understand the beauty, power, integrity, and struggle that come together in the history of that term. We cannot teach Black girls if we are unable to recognize that our teaching and their learning happens in the context of a white supremacist society, in which our social power as white people is as profound as their vulnerability as Black girls; in fact, our power and their vulnerability come from the same place. Recognizing and confronting the history and the system that deal these cards is the way for us to stand with, protect, and support Black girl students. We are “blind” to it at their peril.

## KNOWLEDGE

Building knowledge about race starts with challenging the narratives white people have been taught and unlearning a mainstream story about fairness and meritocracy. It involves learning the realities of racism and oppression, and acquiring knowledge about people whose racial experiences and dynamics are different from ours. Part of this knowledge building is straightforward—reading articles and books or listening to podcasts that will help one understand history that doesn't reify a traditional narrative but amplifies the stories of people of color that are so rarely told. It is also important for white people to learn about the history of whiteness, and the way that it shapes their lens on the world. Understanding Black girls means nothing if you see them as an aberration from an invisible, unnamed norm shaped by whiteness. Whiteness needs to be understood, not as a neutral objective category, but as a subjective standpoint that impacts how one sees and understands Blackness.

For more knowledge about Black girls, read

- *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, by Austin Channing Brown

- *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*, by bell hooks
- The Combahee River Collective Statement (available at <https://combaheerivercollective.weebly.com/the-combahee-river-collective-statement.html>)
- *Sister Outsider*, by Audre Lorde
- *Other People's Children*, by Lisa Delpit
- *Emergent Strategy*, by adrienne maree brown
- *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, by Joy DeGruy

For more knowledge about Whiteness, read, watch, or listen to

- *White by Law*, by Ian Haney Lopez
- *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, by Carol Anderson
- *Dying of Whiteness*, by Jonathan Metzl
- *Everyday White People Confront Racial and Social Injustice: 15 Stories*, edited by Eddie Moore Jr., Marguerite Penick, and Ali Michael
- *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys*, edited by Eddie Moore Jr., Ali Michael, and Marguerite Penick
- *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, by Toni Morrison
- *White Women, Race Matters*, by Ruth Frankenberg
- “The Souls of White Folks,” by W. E. B. Du Bois
- *Up Against Whiteness*, by Stacey Lee
- “Seeing White,” a Scene on Radio podcast
- *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (PBS)
- *Waking Up White*, by Debby Irving
- *White Fragility*, by Robin DiAngelo
- *Birth of a White Nation: The Invention of White People and Its Relevance Today*, by Jacqueline Battalora
- *Raising Race Questions: Whiteness and Inquiry in Education*, by Ali Michael
- *Witnessing Whiteness* by Shelly Tochluk

## SELF AWARENESS<sup>1</sup>

Developing knowledge of history, the realities of people of color, and the history of whiteness is *key* to racial competence. But many white people learning about racism pursue knowledge development without a visceral sense of their own involvement.

This is why we can have so many book clubs without social transformation.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge, self-awareness, and skills are integrally connected; they cannot be seen as distinct processes. New knowledge about ourselves and the world around us often challenges what we were taught. Most of us were acculturated into falsehoods, and then—for those of us who are white—we grounded our sense of self on those falsehoods. As we learn the true history of the United States and ongoing racial realities and histories, we also learn that much of what we know and have been taught is wrong. This can be profoundly disorienting. As we struggle to understand knowledge that challenges our previous assumptions and truths, there is a newer, bigger task: We need to find a new sense of self based in reality. The following are tasks to engage in for developing a racially conscious self-awareness:

- Negotiate your own personal history with the systemic history you learn.

Consider how the stories and history you are learning impacted you. When you learn about historical racism, ask, “How was my white family impacted by that particular event?” or “How does this impact me, where I live, the money I have, the resources I have access to, my social networks, the health of those I love?”

- Figure out how you feel.

Some white people step onto an antiracist path because of work, school, a personal relationship, or a traumatic experience with racism. But more often, white people begin to learn about racism because it is a requirement at their school or work. As a result of this, many white people tend to *think* their way into understanding racism and what to do about it, rather than *feel* their way. This is actually a well-identified component of identity development for white people (Helms, 1995; Tatum, 2017). Essentially, we may know a lot about racism, but we keep it at an emotional distance. We would respond differently to racist events if we *felt* their impact in our bodies. Instead, white people (myself included) often don’t know what to do or say, because we don’t have gut-level feelings about what is right or wrong with regard to race. To get in touch with your own feelings about racism, try going deeper into particular news stories and connecting with the stories of people and their families. You can also do this by meditating on something that makes you feel vulnerable and connecting that to the vulnerability of Black girls, or by reading one of the vignettes in this volume and imagining it was written by your child.

- Don’t be afraid to cry.

Racism deserves tears. The history of racism is a history of loss, trauma, anguish, dehumanization, and fear. Learning about it brings out all kinds of emotions. I believe white people need to cry about racism, but not in the way we usually do. We often cry because the conversation becomes too much for us, so we want it to end. Or we want to show we are taking it in, so we cry in a public way that recenters the conversation on us and our sadness. When we do this, it takes the

focus away from the pain of people of color, and then those who are actually impacted by racism—physically, economically, emotionally, institutionally—get left out of the conversation. One self-awareness strategy is to create space in your life where you can feel the pain and sadness of racism, without taking the attention away from people of color.

- Journal.

Journal about what you are learning about racism, how it impacts you, and how it makes you feel. Use your journal to record confusing or challenging racial moments when you don't know what to do or say. Find a white ally to help you process it. Return to it again and again.

- Recognize you are a part of a mainstream group, with behaviors that go along with it.

If you are white, you are a symbol of a group called white people. The more you engage in common White-Group Level Behaviors, the more your Black girl students will see you as just another white person. When you act in ways that are counter to the mainstream behaviors of the vast majority of white people, you will be seen more as an advocate or coconspirator. Classic examples of White-Group Level Behaviors<sup>3</sup> include consistently questioning the competence of a person of color; negating a person of color's reality (e.g., "I don't think that was racism . . ."); and not noticing when there are only white people (e.g., on a hiring committee or administrative council).

- Learn the terrain of your bias.

Take an implicit bias test online. Recognize that we all have bias. Don't try to hide it; try to reprogram it and be conscious of it. When you go into class, when you grade, when you discipline, when you meet with parents, remind yourself of what you know about your bias.

- Recognize you may be acting or speaking from a sense of internalized white superiority. We talk a lot about internalized oppression and how it stops people from oppressed groups from speaking up, taking action, or even just taking up space. But we fail to talk about the counterpart to this phenomenon, which is internalized white superiority. This sense of superiority can lead individuals to believe they should always speak up, take action, and take up space, and that they have the right to; in fact it can feel wrong not to. Part of racial proficiency is recognizing this tendency in oneself and undoing it.

## SKILLS

The skills component of racial competency involves repetitive motion. Antiracism is a practice. These are the skills to practice over and over again, as one might in a weight-training or meditation practice. As we practice these skills—day in and

day out—we make ourselves heartier, more robust, more lithe vessels for resisting racism and taking action.

- Fall and recover.

They say that ice skaters<sup>4</sup> will never learn to be great if they don't know how to fall and recover, because many of the most challenging tricks require falling hundreds of times before they can be mastered. Antiracism is similar. We have to be able to make mistakes, get feedback on those mistakes, and keep learning. No person who has stayed on an antiracist path more than a few weeks has not made a mistake.

- Solicit and respond to feedback. Give surveys to parents or exit tickets to students to find out how things are going in your class. Plan to meet with the diversity practitioner at your school to find out what you could be doing differently. Listen closely when people say they have something to say. Thank them and develop a plan to address their concerns. Do not allow yourself to be demoralized by strangers on the internet. Take feedback from people who you trust.
- Listen to the voices of Black women in your school and in the lives of your Black girl students. When parents are organizing a panel discussion, or when your students have a poetry night, make it a point to be there to hear their voices.
- Build a network of white “allies.”

White people who are working to be antiracist need support from other white “allies,” people who will support you and your learning without shaming you, but who will also not let you off the hook. White allies are different from friends who believe you are too hard on yourself, or who may even look down on your anti-racism goals. White allies might be your friends, but they also help you to process and dismantle your own racism in a supportive and accountable way.

- Support in, dump out.<sup>5</sup>

Support the people who are closest to the pain. If you need spaces to find support for yourself, do not go to the people who are closer to the pain of racism than you are. “Dump out.” In other words, dump your own sadness on people who are less impacted by racism than you are, not people of color who are already traumatized. This is the idea of ring theory—readily available online.

## ACTION

There is no change without action. If you are to become an educator who truly supports Black girls, you need to engage.

- Build relationships with accountability partners of color. In my own life, I have people of color who I am accountable to, who will help me remember how to

stay on an active antiracist path, and who will help me direct my energies towards what matters. My accountability partners are people I love and trust, who will tell me when I'm doing something racist.

- Lean in proactively to do what you can in your own sphere of influence, no matter how small you think it is.
- Follow people of color leadership *and* don't lead without consulting people of color. Remember that when you take action, it will impact the people of color in your local context even more than it impacts you. Responding to their localized concerns may likely be more crucial than addressing the most pressing forms of racism you perceive.
- Demonstrate gratitude for critical feedback. Work with a white ally to process it, even though it hurts and all you want to do is defend your intention.
- Practice. Use your white allies to begin role-playing responses to racist remarks that you hear from white students, colleagues, friends, or relatives. There is no reason to expect that you will know exactly what to say when these scenarios come up. That's why you need to practice.
- Strategize and enact interventions (both overt and covert) to racist policy.
- Talk to BIPOC student and faculty groups to offer allyship and action.
- Attend events at your school offered by BIPOC folk. Listen to what their concerns are so that your interventions can be locally informed.
- Brainstorm racial issues in your school or workplace, and strategize how you might support antiracist efforts overtly or covertly.
- Establish accountability for your action with BIPOC folk.
- Treat everything you do as a draft. Give up on trying to do the perfect antiracist thing. If anyone knew how to end racism, they would already be doing it. Many white people don't take action because they don't know the perfect thing to do. Treat everything you do as a draft, and be willing to make mistakes. If you didn't start the draft, you wouldn't have anything to revise or get feedback on.

What would a racially competent white person look like?

Being racially competent means that a person has built up the muscle, the resilience, the vast comfort zone, the robust antiracist support network, the familiarity and comfort with the discomfort zone, the self-care habits, and the chutzpah to be able to learn from mistakes and from racially stressful or challenging situations.

Being racially competent means that, under pressure, one doesn't give up, turn silent, flee the scene, or blame others.

Being racially competent means taking action informed by the needs and concerns of people of color in their localized context, with a nuanced understanding of the impact of systemic racism and the impact of one's intervention on people of color.

Racial competency is the combination of knowledge, self-awareness, skills, and action that helps white people be contributing members of a healthy multiracial community.

Even as I offer this framework for competency, it is imperative that teachers recognize that racial competency is not actually a destination. Once a person is truly competent in matters of race and racism, they recognize that there is so much more to learn. Rather than arriving at a point of expertise and completion, the next step beyond competency is humility (Foronda et al., 2016). It is about having the humility to recognize that no matter how much one knows about race and racism, there is always more to learn. It is about realizing that no matter how much you know about whiteness, there will always be things you cannot see. It is about knowing that no matter how many books you read about Black girls, you cannot know how an individual child's Blackness and girlness impact her until you get to know her. A color-conscious awareness (as opposed to color-blind) helps you understand that race and racism have likely impacted her life in profound ways. But it doesn't mean you know everything—or even anything—about *how* it has impacted her, until you meet her and build a true relationship.

## NOTES

1. Thank you to Eleonora Bartoli for helping to clarify this point for me, and for sharing her knowledge. For more on Eleonora's work, see her blog at [www.eleonorabartoli.com](http://www.eleonorabartoli.com).
2. See Tre Johnson's piece "When Black People Are in Pain, White People Join Book Clubs" (2020).
3. The examples come from the *White People Confronting Racism* manual.
4. I learned this analogy from Sarah Halley, who leads the *White People Confronting Racism* work based in Philadelphia.
5. This concept comes from grief counseling, but it was originally applied to anti-racist learning by Colleen Lewis in a workshop we taught together with Nolan Cabrera for USC's Equity Institutes.