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I Was a Racist Teacher and I Didn't Even Know It

November 21, 2019 by [Laurie Calvert](#)

I was a racist teacher and I didn't recognize it.

At the time that I taught, I would have argued that I was the opposite. I was a progressive, a Democrat. I campaigned in my progressive town in Western North Carolina for the first Black man to run for the U.S. Senate against a notorious racist from our state, Jesse Helms. I voted for Obama, even volunteered in his office during the 2008 campaign.

As a teacher, I went out of my way to introduce Black and Brown authors and civil rights leaders into my English lessons. Frustrated that I hadn't been exposed to many multicultural books appropriate for middle school, I started a book club with middle school teachers and got funding for us to read books by Black and Latino authors and talk about how we might use their works in our classrooms. I showed an approved-for-school version of the film "Glory" to my eighth-grade students and pointed out, as the Massachusetts 54th regiment endured bigotry and racial slurs from townspeople, that "it's a mistake to believe that all the racists are in the South."

Moving to Washington, D.C., in 2010 changed me. Working for five years in the Obama administration in the U.S. Department of Education, I began to become aware of a more insidious side to myself. I won't say I was "woke." It wasn't that fast. **But over**

time I began to recognize a latent racism in me, one that had been hidden even to myself.

My boss at the time, Arne Duncan, talked often about the need for **transparency** in education, arguing that truth serves as an antiseptic by bringing issues into the open, into the light. He believed that we should examine ourselves and make sure that the equity we were promoting in education policy was present in us as individuals and in the U.S. Department of Education.

To accomplish this, Duncan's team brought into the Department a team of racial bias experts to lead his senior staff and political appointees through a series of "Courageous Conversations About Race," facilitated by Michelle Molitor of the D.C. Equity Lab. **The progressive in me couldn't wait to participate, to have my values affirmed and to be seen as one of the good guys who gets it. Definitely not a racist.**

From the beginning, though, I could sense something was off inside me. During the first day of training, Molitor taught us to listen to each other's stories without judgement, which is tougher than it sounds. Then she asked us to describe to a partner a time when we first recognized the skin we are in. Though I hadn't planned to, I went into a semi-rant about anger I still felt for parents of Black students who had over the years implied that I was a racist.

One mother had told me it was "insensitive" for me to show "Glory" in school, that her daughter felt demoralized seeing how African Americans were treated while sitting in a class of mostly white students. When the mother had said over the phone, "I know that you *want me to believe* you care about students of color," I went ballistic! How dare she? Didn't she know I was on her side?

Molitor introduced a range of concepts that were new to me: microaggression, white privilege, and the difference between prejudice and racism. But it was listening to others' stories that shifted my thinking the most. Colleague after colleague — people more educated and influential than I — described events that I did not realize still happened in the United States.

Patrice described her husband being pulled over by police while jogging in their wealthy Atlanta neighborhood. Bill, a Native American, recounted having his long braid pulled by women who made comments about wanting to be with "a savage." The

stories challenged my assumptions about race relations in this country and about my complicity.

I began to see myself as part of the problem. Could those parents who criticized me have been partly right? Was I supporting structures and systems that kept white people in power?

Looking back, there were tells that I can now see more clearly: my reluctance to criticize white literary greats, like Jack London, to call them out over racist writing. My inability to connect with Black boys in the classroom and sometimes my fear of them. My over-the-top habit of portraying myself publicly as someone who is “definitely not a racist.”

As a teacher I was aware of disparities in how both Black and white educators discipline students. Black kids are more likely to be suspended for the same infraction that does not put a white kid out of school. When education reformers raised this issue, I often felt frustrated. “Black kids escalate when you call them out,” I said to them, “when white kids often don’t.”

I fell into a defensive position to protect myself. **Instead of worrying about being right, I should have asked, “Is there anything in the way that I call out Black students that causes them to push back?” Are my actions, in fact, racist?**

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I became more aware of my tendency to stereotype, fear and blame Black people. I know better now, but I am not “cured.” I know that voting for Obama and driving up from North Carolina to see him inaugurated does not mean I don’t still have racist tendencies. I see with new eyes the huge advantage I’ve been given by being born white, how it has opened doors for me, but I harbor some irrational fears that if people of color win, I will somehow lose.

One strategy that has helped is noticing when I feel like this, when a racial issue makes me feel angry or defensive. That is often a sign that I am protecting my own white power at the expense of someone else and I need to reflect and pray.

Many of my white friends and family are going to be uncomfortable with my views, and some will feel the same kind of defensiveness I've felt many times. That's okay. I get it. To see that what you have believed for so long is actually a lie is hard. It's like the map of the world that I've been using to make my way is wrong, and I am lost without it. I don't know where to turn for a new map.

More Radical Reads: [Not Easy, Still Worth It: 4 Steps for Talking About Racism with a Racist Relative](#)

It's difficult to look at oneself objectively. The inside work is the hardest when the stakes are high and our habits of mind intractable.

I am learning to think of my views of race as moving along a spectrum toward greater understanding of myself and my part in racial inequity. I started as someone who theoretically objected to racism. Over time, I have moved toward humanity. I have learned that it is not enough to not be a racist. It's not enough to hate the Klan or denounce white supremacists. I am learning to become anti-racist.

Anti-racism is more of an action than a feeling. I'm learning to take action to promote equity and to call out injustice. I am learning to lean into doing my part to help this country that I love become true to our promise of justice for all.

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