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Is Your Teaching Practice Sustainable?

How Can White Teachers Promote Racial Equity in the Classroom?

Resources

Professional Offerings

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Is Your Teaching Practice Sustainable?

Let's face it – teaching is a difficult job. There are many demands that can eat up our time and drain our energy, not the least of which is assessing and providing feedback on student work (especially in the ELA classroom, where lengthy pieces of writing are often what we ask our students to produce). When combined with the challenges of developing curriculum, designing lessons, improving classroom management, communicating with families, undertaking new initiatives, and attending meetings, it's no wonder teachers experience what is known as “burn-out.”

“Who is doing the work in our classrooms?” educator Catlin Tucker asks in her [recent presentation](#) at Fall [CUE](#) 2019, the focus of which is workflow and how to make it more student-lead. She reminds us that “[t]he person doing the work in the classroom is the person doing the learning.” So, in a classroom where the majority of the workflow is teacher-lead, not only is the teacher spending precious time and energy that could be used in better ways to support student learning, student learning is actually lessened by the amount of work the teacher is doing (as opposed to putting it on the students).

Tucker begins her presentation by describing a common workflow she observes when she visits classrooms:

It's teacher-lead workflow. So, teacher assigns the work, students do the work, and the teacher collects massive stacks of literal or digital work. Then the teacher spends hours of their time outside of school giving feedback to student work. Then they pass back the work, students glance at the grade or the point value, and then we're lucky if it makes it into the recycling (Tucker).

Sound familiar? Tucker goes on to remind teachers that the “heavy cognitive lifting” should be done by students; they'll learn more in a classroom where the workflow is student-lead. She suggests four key shifts in a teacher's daily practice. Each shift is designed to put more responsibility and agency on the student and less on the teacher, thus increasing a student's potential for meaningful learning and decreasing the amount of work the teacher has to do to set up, monitor, and evaluate that learning. These shifts are:

1. Teach students to track, monitor, reflect on, and communicate to their parents about their progress;

2. Provide timely, actionable feedback in class as students work;
3. Make time to grade finished products with the students sitting next to you; and
4. Partner with students and prioritize their agency.

While the first and fourth shifts are certainly important, I want to focus on the second and third, both of which involve using class time to give feedback and grade student work. It's important for teachers to keep in mind that the purpose of feedback is to enhance learning and improve student work, so feedback should only be given when there is an expectation that students will do something with it (and the opportunity for them to do so). For example, comments written on a graded essay that a student is not allowed to revise are basically meaningless, as they are neither timely nor actionable, and will most likely be skimmed over to locate the grade.

Tucker recommends a few strategies to capitalize on class time to provide feedback to students. In order to give her students feedback in the moment and check to see what revisions they have made, she uses Google docs and pops in and out of her students' docs as they are working in class. This is an interesting idea. It allows her to witness what her students actually do with the feedback (rather than skipping over it to see the grade). Tucker's students know not to talk to her or ask her questions during this process (they can communicate with her through their docs if need be). Of course, this type of system relies on frontloading clearly defined classroom expectations and creating a certain classroom culture but seems well worth the time it would take at the beginning of the year.

Tucker also grades work with her students sitting beside her. This takes the mystery out of the grade, as she can show her thinking and explain to the student exactly why they deserve the grade they get. Students leave the discussion with a clear understanding of the grade they have earned, eliminating the time and energy it would take to have those "why'd you give me a ___?" conversations or emails down the road.

Finally, Tucker is intentional about what parts of an assignment she grades and whether or not she provides feedback. She even has a slide in her presentation that sums it up in the form of a flowchart. It starts with the question, "What is the purpose of this work?"

- If the purpose is practice or review, there is no need to give feedback or a grade.
- If the purpose is working toward a product, there should be feedback, but no grade
- If the purpose is assessment or a finished product, this is the only time there should be a grade.

Following these suggestions, feedback and grades are both more meaningful for students and less time consuming for teachers.

How Can White Teachers Promote Racial Equity in the Classroom?

I recently came across an article called [“How to Be an Antiracist Educator,”](#) by Dena Simmons. The title caught my attention – I thought, *of course I’m an antiracist educator*. But after doing some research and reflection, I have come to realize that simply being a non-racist myself does not make me a proactive antiracist educator (no matter how much I abhor the idea of racism).

Like many people in our small state, I am white. Over my 13+ years in the classroom, I have only taught a handful of students who were not white. Still, that doesn’t excuse me from doing everything I can to ensure equity for all students, which means talking about issues of race, privilege, and implicit biases, no matter how uncomfortable those conversations might be. As Simmons says in her article, “We cannot afford to wallow in our discomfort regarding issues of race and equity.” She therefore recommends five (5) things educators can do to promote racial equity.

Engage in vigilant self-awareness. It is up to white educators to reflect on our own potential biases and make sure we are doing what we can to combat them. Additionally, we must recognize the privileges we enjoy as white people and use that power to promote equity. “If we do not know our power,” says Simmons, “we can abuse it unintentionally or fail to leverage it toward antiracism.” Sometimes white people like to consider themselves “color-blind,” claiming they treat everyone the same because they don’t notice differences like race, but in doing so they are erasing a large part of an individual’s identity. Not only that, but how can we treat everyone the same when students are individuals with different needs?

Acknowledge racism and the ideology of white supremacy. According to Simmons, “Failing to acknowledge racism not only erases histories, cultures, and identities, but also ignores ongoing differential treatment based on race.” Regardless of whether we see instances of overt racism in our classrooms or not, at the very least there is implicit bias and white privilege that we must address.

Study and teach representative history. We have all heard the saying “history is written by the victors,” but that is no reason to perpetuate what Simmons points out as the fact that “Eurocentric values and content dominate U.S. schooling.” She makes some suggestions of additions we can make to our curricula along these lines.

Talk about race with students. Simmons talks about the educators who “insist that there is no need to discuss equity or culturally responsive practices; their school population is mostly white. The pushback at these schools reveals an underlying discomfort with talking about race, identity, and difference in our nation’s classrooms.” [Robin DiAngelo talks about the “white fragility” of educators](#), pointing at our tendency to shrink away from issues of race because we are afraid other white people will feel guilty or get defensive. In fact, I hesitated to even write this article because I was afraid of offending well-meaning white teachers. It is important, however, for us to have these conversations about the existence of racism and to not be “harmful in our ignorance” (Simmons).

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When you see racism, do something. In an article called [“Speaking Up Without Tearing Down,”](#) Loretta J. Ross presents the idea of “calling in” instead of “calling out.” In other words, instead of scolding and embarrassing our students when they speak offensively out of ignorance, we can invite them into a dialogue about the reasons they shouldn’t say such things. Not only that, but we can teach students how to do the same with one another:

Learning about the ways in which they are privileged doesn’t need to be an exercise in guilt and shame for students. Learning to call one another in—and to respond to being called in with a sincere desire to do and be better—can help students feel good about committing themselves to a more just world and gives them another tool to build it. (Ross)

Whether calling out a student who knowingly promotes racism or calling in a student who comments out of ignorance, we must speak up. After all, it is our duty as educators to “fight against racism—and other isms and phobias” (Simmons).

Resources

Read more about this month’s topics here:

- Student-lead Workflow
 - [Caitlin Tucker Live at Fall CUE 2019](#)
 - [“How Can Students Self-Assess When Teachers Do All the Grading and Work?”](#)
- Talking About Race in the Classroom
 - [ASCD Professional Learning & Community for Educators](#)
 - [Teaching Tolerance: Diversity, Equity, and Justice](#)

Professional Offerings**CLiF Application for [Year of the Book](#) Now Open**

The Children’s Literacy Foundation (CLiF) announces the application for [Year of the Book](#) for the 2020-2021 school year is currently open; [applications](#) are due January 29, 2020. Schools receive \$25,000 worth of author visits, teacher resources, books for classrooms and libraries, books for children to keep, and opportunities to connect with parents and community. For more information on grant components, [click here](#). Public elementary schools located in New Hampshire or Vermont should click the link to see if they are [eligible](#). Please contact Meredith with any questions at meredith@clifonline.org or 802.244.0944.

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