

Using the Expertise of CPS Teachers in and out of the Classroom to Combat Racism

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Inside the Classroom

Mayra Almaraz: I teach Ethnic Studies, a junior and senior year elective course, at Taft High School. Taft is located in the far northwest side of the city in a mostly white, blue collar, city worker, Chicago neighborhood.

My first unit of ethnic studies is always the most difficult. In this unit, I introduce students to the concept of systemic racism and privilege. We use readings and ideas from James Baldwin, Paulo Freire, and Beverly Daniels Tatum. Tatum's first chapter of her book, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?", informs students of a new definition of racism: In short, she states that racism is not being mean to someone based on the color of their skin (that is discrimination). Instead, she defines racism as a system of advantage based on race.

Tatum believes this definition is best because it holds people responsible for the systems in place that contribute to inequality and privilege, even if you're not aware that you are benefiting. To better understand the chapter and concepts, I hold a Socratic Seminar and ask

students to discuss if her definition helps or hurts our society.

For many of my students, this is a liberating conversation. This is where many of my students of color open up to the class about the ways in which they've felt that the color of their skin, ethnic background, or religion made them feel "less than." For many of my white students, this conversation is hurtful. Students have shared that when they first read this definition, they feel sad because they've never realized they have certain benefits or privileges that their peers don't have. The discussions that emerge between my students during this difficult conversation are messy, tough, raw with emotion, but so full of hope.

And they are necessary.

Ms. Almaraz, I'm not going to lie, when I first read Tatum, I was very mad at you. But after hearing my classmates' experiences, I got it. I'm getting it. I'm still not there. But please be patient with me.

In her chapter, Tatum describes the importance of being actively anti-racist.

I have never looked at racism this way before. And it makes great sense to me. I get it. But Ms. Almaraz, I need help. How can I be anti-racist? I don't have opportunities to be anti-racist. And I want to make a difference.

My student's words resonated with me. As a teacher of color, I am conscious of the fact that my experiences and realities are not my students', especially those that have a different ethnic background from me. I try hard to incorporate what I teach my students in my everyday life. I struggled with my student's request.

How can I teach my white students to be anti-racist?

Then I remembered an experience with my white friend and teaching colleague, Dave

Stieber. One evening, during our National Board Certification class, I mentioned that I was asked to write something for an online publication about the importance of having Latinx teachers. Unfortunately, because I took too long in turning in my piece, the publication's deadline for Hispanic Heritage month was over. They would no longer need my piece.

When I got off the expressway near Taft, there were blue ribbons, everywhere, in support of Blue Lives Matter, increasing my anxiety.

Dave asked me to send him my writing, and through one of his contacts, my piece got published. I will never forget the words he said to me, “I’m able to get my work published whenever I have something, I don’t have to wait for a specific month to publish it. Everyone should have this privilege.”

To me, this was an example of my colleague using his white privilege to help someone without this benefit. So naturally, because of this experience and conversations with him regarding his work around racism, I thought about him when my student asked what she could do to be anti-racist.

Dave Stieber: I teach at Chicago Vocational on the South Side of the city. I love my students and work to make strong connections with them by the curriculum I create, content I teach, and the way in which I get to know my students.

Over my ten years of teaching in CPS I have always worked hard to create a space where my students feel comfortable sharing their stories. I’ve learned from them about their experiences with the police, violence, and what life is like for a kid growing up in the city. I’ve learned that the privileges and experiences I had growing up white were not the same as my

students have. Based on the education my students give me, I have been working on not only trying to be anti-racist in my life, but also to create a class that challenges the system of white supremacy.

One of the ways that I do this is by bringing in guest speakers who work to change the systems in place in our city. I’ve found bringing in guest speakers to be very beneficial for my students and myself. A guest speaker makes the learning further real and relevant, it exposes students to more viewpoints—ones that may differ from or complement our curriculum. It also shakes class up and lets the students hear a voice besides their teacher.

The day after guest speakers my students always say something to the effect of, “the guest speaker we had yesterday was amazing, when are they coming back?” As the teacher, I tend to envy the novelty of the guest speakers. Their fresh voice captivates my students and they are excited to have them in the room.

It wasn’t until this year that the opportunity to be a guest speaker myself became an option. Mayra knew I had written articles for the *Huffington Post* about race. She asked me if I would be willing to come in and talk to her students about my experiences understanding whiteness and privilege.

I was nervous to speak at Taft. I was used to being in front of a room of students, but I had never spoke with white students about working to overcome their privileges. When I got off the expressway near Taft, there were blue ribbons, everywhere, in support of Blue Lives Matter, increasing my anxiety. I had been writing a lot recently about why white people should support the Movement for Black Lives. But, regardless, I knew the work Mayra had been doing with her classes and I was excited.

I knew her students read an article that I had written about ways in which white people could help with systemic racism. I decided to open my guest speaking experience by saying, “Be wary of a white person speaking to you

about race. Meaning: know that, while working to be anti-racist, I am still operating in a place of privilege and so please call me out if necessary.”

The classes went really well. Students asked questions. Many asked ways in which they themselves could work to be anti-racist. Some challenged some of my comments. Some arranged to come back to a later period that I was speaking at.

Among the many great questions and comments, there were two that really resonated with me. One student, who very quietly asked me in front of the whole class, “My parents are racist. What can I do?” Mayra created such a safe and respectful environment that her student felt comfortable enough to ask that question and be honest amongst her peers. I admitted that I had racist family members too (I would contend all white people do). I told her I did not know what it was like to have blatantly racist parents, but by her knowing this about her parents, and her being willing to work to challenge this, this was already a brave step.

Another student stated in front of the entire group, “I want to be like you.” I have to be honest, I’ve never had anyone tell me that before (remember what I said about guest speakers, students love them).

Both of these comments blew me away. I gave both these students some advice after class, such as: listen to People of Color. Read books that will push your thinking, like *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* and *A People’s History of the United States*. Read about Black Youth Project 100 and Assata’s Daughters.

The work that Mayra does in her Ethnic Studies class challenges racism, white supremacy, and privilege, daily. I am thankful for the opportunity to be a part of her work. As teachers, we should not only be inviting guest speakers into our classrooms more often, but we should actually be inviting other teachers to come speak to our students.

We teachers know how brilliant and amazing many of our colleagues are. Rather than using a PB day to go speak to students in other schools like I had to, CPS should encourage collaboration and provide professional development days to work together.

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Here are a few of the reflections from Mayra’s students about my visit:

I really liked the way he talked about how he was working to make a change. It made me think more about what I want to do to help make a difference.

I liked how he shared that he has different views than some of his family members because I have different views than my mother.

I believe Ms. Almaraz invited Mr. Stieber because she wanted us to understand the perspective of a white male who tries to understand racism and does his best to fight against it in his own life.”

What impacted me the most was when he said he would just listen, instead of trying to figure out what to say next, and that’s how he learned a lot of the pain others went through.

I understand that Mr. Stieber acted as both an alternate perspective and an example of how to cause an effect while being a somewhat “small scaled” (i.e. not a politician, political speaker, civil rights leader) influence.

I really liked that he said he is raising his children to be aware of the problems of the world and providing the necessary tools to help them deal with it.

Stieber impacted me because his understanding and honesty of today's society blew me away.

You asked him to come because he speaks about a topic that some hate to believe is true and still going on.

To get the perspective of someone with privilege to show us how he's trying to use his advantages to help others.

Outside of the Classroom

With all the demands that we teachers have upon us, it would be great if we could just leave school and not have to worry about anything else. Unfortunately, teachers who are truly committed to making every aspect of their student's lives better do not have that option.

I remember during my first year of teaching going to visit friends in another city, they started talking bad about Chicago teenagers. Referring to them as gangbangers. I was exhausted from teaching and had been looking forward to getting away and relaxing for a weekend. But now I had a decision to make. I chose the career of teaching youth. In my mind, I did not choose the job of teaching adults.

I had two options: Let the comment go unchallenged, thereby letting that stereotype continue, or say something. Most white people are raised in a way that seeks to avoid confrontation. I was raised the same way. My privilege allowed me the option of not saying something. But my responsibility to my students required that I did.

I spoke with my wife after this situation and expressed my frustration to her, saying something to the effect of, "I enjoy teaching kids and I'm paid to do that, but I have no desire to have to teach adults too." I can't remember her exact words. She phrased it well, but the meaning was basically, "too bad, if you care about kids, then you need to speak up for them."

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She was and is right.

I have encountered so many adults, whether in person or via social media, saying upsetting, ignorant and offensive things about the students I teach. I was on the bus headed downtown from the South Side and a lady next to me on the bus struck up a conversation. Eventually, she found out that I was a teacher and where I worked. As soon as I finished the last syllable of Englewood¹ her face showed complete disgust and she promptly said, "Englewood! Those people are animals, you should never go there."

I responded, "I've worked there five years. I have good kids and parents. Have a nice night." Thankfully, it happened to me by my stop. Believe me I wanted to tell her off. But I had to take the high road: not for me, but for my students. I had to provide a counter narrative to her ingrained stereotypes.

Speaking up is not easy, but we have a duty to our students and their families to challenge every stereotypical or bigoted comment we hear, whether it be from a relative, a friend or a stranger. It is not easy, it is not comfortable, but if I want to really begin to make things better for our students, then it is necessary.

We must use the privileges we are afforded to help our students. I never enjoyed writing.

¹ The neighborhood I worked in at the time.

But I decided to start writing letters to the editor when I read things that were written in the newspaper that I disagreed with. From that, I have submitted many writings over the years.

In Chicago, teachers are required to live in the city if they want to teach in the city. Of all the things Chicago does wrong, this requirement is one that I agree with. As teachers, we have a moral obligation to help make the lives of our students better. One way to do that is to make the city that we all live in better. At times, there is already a disconnect between the experiences of our students' lives and the experiences that we teachers have. The thing is, even if we don't live in the specific neighborhood in which our school is located, if we live in the city, we are infinitely more aware of what life is like for our students than, say, if we commuted from one of the surrounding suburbs. We owe it to our students—as voters, taxpayers, and parents—to have a political, economic, and educational stake in this city.

We owe it to our students to pay taxes to this city to help improve it for everyone. Yes, the way the money is used or not used needs to be improved, but politicians need our revenue to pay for those improvements. These same politicians also need our voices to pressure them to use our revenue the way that it should be used. We owe it to our students to be teachers who not only work in CPS but also send our kids to CPS. By doing so, we obviously will have more at stake in wanting to improve the schools for all children.

Teaching is about building connections with our students. We teachers may differ from our students in terms of race and/or economic status. But when we live in the city, pay taxes here, and send our kids to public schools here, our students will see that, despite our differences, we also share many common bonds—most importantly, the desire to improve the city that we all call home.

We teachers love and care about our students. That is why discussions about the teach-

er residency rule, and any and everything else that impacts our careers as teachers, are vital. But to truly care about and fight for the schools our students deserve, we must also live in and fight for the city that we all deserve.

Mayra Almaraz-De Santiago is a wife and mother of two boys. A proud Chicagoan, she was born and raised in the Northwest Side. Her teaching career began 14 years ago in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood and she is now back to her Northwest Side roots, teaching high school history for CPS. Mayra has a deep passion for social justice and for helping students critically examine the world so they can change it. She is a Golden Apple Scholar. She received her Secondary Education in History degree from DePaul University. She is currently a candidate for National Board Certification.

Dave Stieber is in his tenth year of teaching Social Studies in CPS. He is working to become National Board Certified. He has a Masters in Urban Education Policy Studies from the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is an occasional blogger for the Huffington Post. His partner, Stephanie Stieber, is also a CPS teacher and together they have two children. Their school-aged child attends a CPS neighborhood school.