

ON TEACHING

What Anti-racist Teachers Do Differently

They view the success of black students as central to the success of their own teaching.

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GETTY; PAUL SPELLA / THE ATLANTIC

Editor's Note: *In the next five years, most of America's most experienced teachers will retire. The Baby Boomers are leaving behind a nation of more novice educators. In 1988, a teacher most commonly had 15 years of experience. Less than three decades later, that number had fallen to just three years leading a classroom. The Atlantic's "On Teaching" project is crisscrossing the country to talk to veteran educators. This story is the 17th in our series.*

Ask black students who their favorite teacher is, and they will joyfully tell you. Ask them what it is about their favorite teacher, and most will say some version of this: *They know how to work with me.* So much is in that statement. It means that these

students *want* to work, that they see their teachers as partners in the learning process, and that they know the teacher-student relationship is one in which they both have power. In other words, black students know that they bring intellect to the classroom, and they know when they are seen—and not seen.

As the principal of San Francisco's Mission High School and an anti-racist educator for more than 30 years, I have witnessed countless black students thrive in classrooms where teachers see them accurately and show that they are happy to have them there. In these classes, students choose to sit in the front of the class, take careful notes, shoot their hands up in discussions, and ask unexpected questions that cause the teacher and other classmates to stop and think. Given the chance, they email, text, and call the teachers who believe in them. In short, these students are everything their families and community members have raised and supported them to be.

I have seen some of these very same students walk into another teacher's classroom, go to the last row of desks, and put their head down. I have seen them sit frozen in their seat, staring at an assignment—when earlier I had heard them make jokes, talk excitedly about the content of their history class, celebrate solving a vexing algebra equation, or shake a test tube with authority, waiting for a result. Their report cards often reveal this disparity in classroom experiences: A's and B's in classes where they feel valued and C's, D's, or even F's in classes where they don't.

When black students' academic strengths are overlooked, black students are marginalized. They are kept out of advanced courses, given bad grades, and sent to the dean's office. Over the years, the power that they initially bring to school is siphoned off by educators at every level of the educational system who do not respect, and in some cases do not wish to respect, the intellectual contributions of black students.

Anti-racist teachers take black students seriously. They create a curriculum with black students in mind, and they carefully read students' work to understand what they are expressing. This might sound fairly standard, but making black students feel valued goes beyond general "good teaching." It requires educators to view the success of black students as central to the success of their own teaching. This is a paradigm shift: Instead of only asking black students who are not doing well in

class to start identifying with school, we also ask teachers whose black students are not doing well in their classes to start identifying with those students.

I spent the majority of my career in the classroom, and I loved it because—to do it well—it required that I call on all aspects of my humanity. Standing in front of my black students, I knew that it was my responsibility to invite them into the classroom and then to see, push, and protect them once they were there. Over the years, collaborating with other anti-racist educators, I co-developed an approach that was successful—and it showed in the students' attendance, grades, and quality of work.

We read articles and books, and we attend workshops centered around black pedagogy. That helps us examine cultural differences in discourse styles, so we can better understand black students' analytical approaches in essays. We learn how to integrate oral language into our curriculum, such as adding a debate unit or a poetry-recitation assignment, and to provide ample opportunities for students to work together. And we learn that nothing goes without saying and that praise and direction should be plentiful. In essence, we do what works for black students, which also works for all students.

Educators who are committed to black students use evidence in their own classrooms to find ways to improve. They analyze the assignments handed in, identifying ways in which their teaching reached—and didn't reach—all of their students. They recognize the brilliance of a black student's contribution to a class discussion and seize on it. They disaggregate data such as grades and attendance by ethnicity, look for patterns, and problematize their own practice—rather than assume that their students weren't motivated or sufficiently prepared to engage with challenging material. They ask themselves: Why did Taylor get a C on the final when he earned an A or a B on all of his other assignments, many of them equally demanding? Why is Vince silent in his group? What inspired Hile to write multiple drafts of her essay, each time asking for more detailed feedback? They seek support from colleagues who are effective teachers for all of their students, including black students, because they know that the changes they make to their teaching practice will have an impact on their students' achievement. All of this makes them better educators.

Teachers who do not value black students will shift the discussion away from their own practice when they see that black students are not succeeding in their classes. They will create bonds that eventually turn into factions with fellow educators who are also unwilling to change their approach.

To fight against systemic racism means to buck norms. Educators at every level must be willing to be uncomfortable in their struggle for black students, recognizing students' power and feeding it by honoring their many contributions to our schools. Teachers need to insist on using their own power to consistently reveal and examine their practice, and seek input from black stakeholders; they must invite black parents to the table, listen to their concerns and ideas, and act on them. Principals must clearly and consistently communicate the anti-racist vision for their school, create professional-development opportunities for staff, recognize teachers who successfully teach all of their students, and intervene when they see problems. District-level administrators must more firmly root their anti-racist messaging in black students' school experiences, making expectations for educators clear. And school-board members need to listen to educators who have shown efficacy in educating black students. They must enact policies that hold us all accountable to our black families. We must make demands of ourselves and work together in our communities.

The only measure of our anti-racist teaching will be the academic success of all of our students, including our black students.

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