

A White Teacher's View of Racism

Lee Gargagliano

As a white educator, teaching in communities of color has exposed me to many of the ways that racism shapes my students' lives—the experiences of racism have been similar everywhere that I have taught: in New York, Chicago, and Oakland. The constant harassment of students on their way to school sends a clear message: "It doesn't matter how hard you work to play by the rules, you have already been judged as less-than, and the cards are stacked against you." Of course, by the time a student reaches my classroom, they have received this message again and again: in school, applying for public assistance, in the healthcare system, as they search for housing, and in the job market. Fortunately, people are resilient, and many students in adult education have learned how to block out this message.

The first time I witnessed a student of mine get arrested was directly outside the doors of the Chicago community center where I worked at the time. It was my first year teaching, and I was on my way to make copies when I saw my student with his hands against a cop car and a police officer rifling through his bag. He had been stopped for walking through an alley, and the police had decided that was enough of a reason to violate his 4th Amendment rights and search his belongings. Meanwhile, I walked through the alleys every day



without facing harassment. I stood and watched as he was searched illegally in the hope that my presence would serve as some sort of protection. I was shaken and outraged at his lack of power and my lack of power to defend him, but my student was unfazed. This was his life; it was an everyday occurrence.

Twice this year, Black students who I work with have been incarcerated the day before they were scheduled to take a high school equivalency test. In one case, a judge literally said that he was sending my student to Juvenile Hall to "teach [her] a lesson" on the day before she was scheduled to take the last section of the GED. A second student was arrested the evening before he was scheduled to take the HiSET and spent four days in jail for loitering. As I shared these stories with my friends and family, they expressed shock and horror, yet as I discussed it with the students they shrugged their shoulders or blamed themselves for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

We need to talk about racism because, for those directly impacted, racism, when unspoken, becomes normal; and for people who are not directly impacted, racism, when unspoken, becomes invisible. We cannot accept racism as invisible or normal, so we must speak out. One powerful thing about the #BlackLivesMatter movement has been its ability to a) make racism visible, thus pushing those with privilege to act, and b) make everyday racism unacceptable to people who have been pushed to quietly accept it as a fact of life. With racism both visible and unacceptable, we can work together to end it.

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