

I'm Just Tired: Racial Justice Conversations During a Pandemic

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This essay is our collaborative reflection on a moment in a Zoom class in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic and a national racial justice reckoning. The students were enrolled in a PhD program in education. Eight students, including Tynetta, were people of color; seven, including Casey and Jane (the professor) were white. Over the months since the course ended, we have written, reflected, and talked about our experiences, trying to learn to do better. What follow are our confessions.

Jane

Having been glued to the news of Covid-19 and disturbing displays of racial injustice, I wanted to change my fall course, to foreground theory and research on antiracist pedagogy (e.g., Love, 2019) and examine the effects of systemic racism on teaching and learning. I knew the students and believed we could have substantive conversations about these challenging topics. I did not, however, follow common advice to develop ground rules and shared expectations. That omission was my first mistake.

My second mistake was overlooking the effects of the pandemic. The students were K-12 educators navigating a difficult year, learning to teach online, caring for their students and their own families, turning on a dime each time their district leadership changed the rules. Class often began with someone saying, "I'm just tired." Students were exhausted physically and emotionally, and many were reeling from daily reports of racial injustice and the ensuing protests. I should have realized how much I was asking.

We started with what I thought were tentative but relatively open conversations. Then it happened. A class member said something like, "I wonder if the political correctness pendulum is swinging too far because of race." Boom. I was taken aback and managed to say, "I think we're a long way from having to worry about that," and moved the discussion on. Mistake three.

Tynetta

I was eager to have these conversations about race and education, and I hoped my classmates would share my passion for racial justice. However, as the semester progressed, some conversations failed to focus on antiracism at all. We walked on eggshells, reluctant to dive into the issues. If my colleagues were like me, they were exhausted. I was tired, on edge, and unable to control my emotions. The pandemic had stretched me thin in every area of my life, and recent

racially motivated events added to the weight I carried. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor... when I think about Trayvon Martin my heart aches for my two sons. I was filled with helplessness and fear. I refused to engage beyond what felt safe, so as not to sacrifice yet another portion of my well-being.

The way I handled myself during that course still bothers me. My peer's comment about the pendulum should have been addressed, but I said nothing. I questioned whether it was even worth addressing, considering the adamant and insensitive nature of its delivery. I remained silently frustrated, and in doing so, sustained the biased paradigms that inform educational policy and practice. That moment emphasized the historically systemic, often unrecognized phenomenon of racial inequality that still exists. I felt there was nothing I could say to shift this mature adult's beliefs, despite knowing the damage those beliefs can do to the quality of education my sons and others like them deserve.

Casey

Even now as I reflect on my peer's statement about the pendulum swing, I think, "Surely she didn't mean it *that* way." In choosing not to speak, I failed to confront ideas that are corrosive to equity and excellence for students of color. Why did I avoid asking her to clarify or sharing with her how I, and likely everyone present, felt about what she was saying? Would I have been more courageous if we had been in a shared physical space, without the weight of the pandemic?

I am embarrassed to say that this was not an isolated incident. I also recall a peer's presentation on trauma-informed pedagogy, including the concept of racial trauma. In breakout rooms, we were to discuss our own experiences as educators. I was in a group with two classmates, both Black. I shared a story about my student who had been molested by a family member and who asked to be excused from conversations concerning the brutal rape of the protagonist of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Another member of our group shared a similar teaching experience. As we discussed our practices with students who experienced trauma, the third member of our group interjected, "Look what you did." Although we each could have shared experiences centered on the racial trauma our students have experienced, we completely avoided talking about it. We were both baffled. Why did we redirect in this way?

I have thought about both of these conversations with my classmates often. I have difficult conversations with my high school students—conversations that are only amplified by the pandemic. I try to introduce new ideas, challenge perceptions, and provide tools for navigating the world. Why should difficult conversations with my peers be any harder?

Concluding Confessions

We have struggled to write this essay, even to discuss it. We have tiptoed around it. We have worried about how the class members will receive these confessions, and what will be the impact on the cohorts involved. Casey and Ty felt culpable for remaining silent and wanted to

enumerate their mistakes as Jane did, but Jane believed the responsibility was hers as the instructor. She felt an urge to balance the needs of those who engage earnestly—wanting to understand issues of racial injustice better and sometimes saying unintentionally hurtful things—with the needs of those who are harmed by those statements, whatever the intentions. We have made excuses for ourselves and other class members. We even wavered about sharing such a specific event—which might cause hurt feelings—and whose feelings we should protect. Ultimately, we decided to make this story public because we need to take responsibility for our actions and we hope it will be of help to others.

Would the conversation have gone differently at a different time—without the psychological impact of the pandemic, or when we could hold these difficult discussions while sitting together in a shared physical space? Of course, we cannot answer those questions, but we are learning that when we avoid conversations that deserve our physical and emotional presence, we perpetuate—we allow to exist—what is said, regardless of its intent. Conversations about race deserve a commitment to understanding each other, which requires willingness to sit with the discomfort and then to confront it. We have no easy solutions to offer, but we are learning to do better. Going forward, we will choose to have the conversation, even when it is uncomfortable. The ways we do this will be different for each of us, given our different roles and identities and experiences. We will still stumble, but we are all committed to confronting racist assumptions directly when they surface.

References

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