

Colorblind Versus Color'splaining: When Teachers and Teacher Mentors Examine the Use of Race as a Lens to Evaluate Teaching Practice

At the Knowles Teacher Initiative, the work of mentoring and coaching is an essential part of the support that we offer our Fellows. We mentor and coach our Fellows with the aim of supporting the development of teacher leaders—teachers who have a vision for their own growth and the growth of the teachers in their school context for the improvement of student learning. As former teachers and educators, we bring a myriad of knowledge and experience to beginning teacher support and development. Because we recognize that teachers are professionals who benefit from articulating and working toward professional goals, a significant part of our work is dedicated to supporting them in that effort. We also believe teachers need space, time, support, and community to promote professional growth. As a result of these beliefs, the work of coaching and mentoring must be individualized and contextualized, so we cultivate relationships with

Fellows in order to better understand their individual needs. And we recognize that as a part of the Knowles community, we can learn as much from Fellows as they can from us.

In this blog we share one example of individualized support with respect to having conversations about race and the potential impacts on teaching and learning in one school. The format of this blog is as follows. The italicized text that follows “X’s internal monologue” represent our recollections of how we were thinking about the interaction as we were having it—we didn’t actually share these thoughts with one another until we started to write this blog. The unitalicized text that follows the words “X wrote or “X responded” are the actual words included in our exchange with one another. We begin the piece with our introductions and end with some reflections on the work

Ayanna Perry’s Introduction: As an African American Program Officer for Teacher Development, I am very attuned to the language used to describe students of color. This attention results in me having to be very careful about how I approach teachers who use what could be interpreted as deficit language when describing the academic achievements of students of color, inexplicably, at times. For example, I have seen cases where some students lack a foundational prior academic experience, and their teachers classify those students by race (“My black students cannot factor”), rather than their shared lack of access to opportunity. More troubling still, this kind of categorization happens even when black students are not the only ones struggling.

Suzanne’s introduction: In my youth and young adult years, I never had to have conversations about race and racism because they were topics I was never forced to confront. However, as a teacher, I see that these conversations *must* happen, and as a white person, I must examine my role in the persistence of or resistance to racial inequity in my school and community.

The context: Suzanne and Ayanna engaged in a conversation about race and education. For Ayanna, conversations about race and education are some of the most difficult to have because she realizes that each conversant approaches the

conversation with some beliefs about how these conversations should go and what resolutions might look like.

Suzanne wrote:

I recently attended the Courageous Conversations training by [Beyond Diversity](#) and I've been thinking a lot about my role in the context of race and how racial issues play out at my school. When I look at data (e.g., grades, test scores, writing, notebook checks) about how my students of color are performing in my class, I see that they are consistently not performing as well as my white students. Historically, I have looked outward for reasons why this may be happening—issues like home life, work outside of school, nutrition, substance abuse, etc. I am beginning to look inward at what actions I may be doing (consciously or unconsciously) that are perpetuating the different outcomes between my students of color and my white students. I think I'm doing what has been shown to be effective in supporting my struggling students (e.g., thinking positively about their ability; having high expectations; communicating that I care; providing food in the classroom; and implementing standards-based grading, flexible due dates and lots of instructional scaffolds) but so far this year, I have not seen any change in the prevailing trend. I realize that this is long-term issue that requires dynamic and complex solutions, but sometimes I can't help but feel like I could do more.

Ayanna's internal monologue:

Immediately I thought, here we go again! The students of color are underperforming compared to the white students. We are always comparing students of color to white students. Does Suzanne think that her students of color need to be like her white students? Aren't there students of color who are performing well? Why can't those students be the meter stick by which we measure others? Why can't we compare students who are struggling to students who are successful? Why does everything have to be along race lines?

I recognized that this swift response is a result of years of both being compared to my white counterparts and being expected to underperform my white counterparts even when I'd shown I was, in some instances, more capable of doing the work. In high school, I was one of a few African American female students in my honors and Advanced Placement classes and often felt like I wasn't

performing as well as some of my counterparts, even when it wasn't true. I was out performing them, but somehow had the notion that their grades were higher than mine. I wondered then and still wonder now, what makes white students the measure of excellence?

I also wondered if Suzanne was conflating issues associated with income and race. This was also troubling. Is it true that all of the students of color working with Suzanne are living in difficult home situations? Or is she saying that the ones who are struggling the most are from these situation? While troubling circumstances do impact students' abilities to perform well in school, there are other circumstances that are large influences on student performance, like policies in schools that over-discipline and target certain student groups. I thought all of these things and then realized, that there was more that I needed to learn about this school and how Suzanne was thinking about her teaching and her students.

Ayanna responded:

There are a lot of things that come to my mind here. I read this over the weekend and let it percolate because it's a lot to process and take in. Some wonderings I have are:

1. Are you in a place where you would be able/comfortable asking your students of color how they experience your school/classroom?
2. I wonder how comparing them to white kids impacts how you see them as deficient compared to capable.
3. I wonder if there is a meter stick that is closer to daily or weekly achievements that would be more useful to see how they are improving.
4. Is it true that the white students don't have some of the issues that you attributed to students of color in the past? [referencing the following statement: "I have looked outward for reasons why this may be

happening—issues like home life, work outside of school, nutrition, substance abuse, etc.”]

Suzanne’s internal monologue:

When I read Ayanna’s responses I thought, Oh no, I did not do a good job explaining myself and now I sound racist, the exact outcome I had feared. I recognized that in my exchange I was attributing experiences like poverty and trauma with my students of color, but this is not because I think these are things that all people of color endure, but because I was thinking of specific students whom I know fit these criteria.

As a white person having frank and honest conversations about race can be intimidating, especially with a colleague of color. Am I going to say something racially insensitive and not know it (highly likely)? Am I going to have assumptions made about me and my ignorance about race because I am white? Am I actually ignorant about race? Part of my trepidation when it comes to talking about race is that I feel like I should have some tools to do this, and I really don’t. But then, whose job is it to do the educating? The onus should not fall on my colleague of color to correct me, because honestly, that sounds exhausting. It should not be the sole responsibility of people of color to educate white people for how to address and examine race. So then, how do we have open and frank conversations about race without being offensive or offended? How do I talk to my students about race without being insensitive? How do I model what a healthy conversation about race looks like, when I’m not entirely sure I know myself?

Suzanne responded:

#1 [In response to whether I’ve asked my students of color about their experience in my class,] I want to say not yet. I want to have an open and frank conversation but I’m not sure the groundwork to allow this type of conversation to take place between students and staff is complete. I think my students of color experience a lot coming from a community where they are not the minority and then arriving at a school where they are oftentimes the only person of color in the room. So, I want to be able to have an honest conversation with these students, but I also don’t want to make them feel singled out. Presently, I work with one of the special education teachers to solicit feedback from these students. But I have not

identified a space where I can sit down and talk to these kids in a way where they feel empowered, and are not being asked to be a spokesperson for their race. This gives me a lot to think about though. I wonder if I could seek to create a space where this type of conversation could happen with the help of some other teachers.

In response to #2, I try to be very asset-based in my thinking. When I talk about student performance in this instance, I am talking specifically about grades, not about what other positive elements they bring to my class. So in the starkest of terms my students of color have lower grades than my white students. Part of what I'm trying to figure out is why.

#3 [With respect to choosing a different meter stick,] I wonder this too (SO MUCH)! Is it important that they "learn science" or that they learn to learn? How am I rewarding students for contributing to class in other ways? But then I feel pressured to get my students to a certain level of scientific literacy and proficiency. I think about how the means to achieve that end may need to be different for different students, but I'm not really sure what that looks like yet.

#4 Some of my white students absolutely have these same issues. In some way I feel like this serves as evidence that I must be doing something/acting differently with white students than my students of color. I just haven't quite identified how. This is the main part of my "wonder." Why is it that students confronted with the same social/logistical/emotional challenges are doing so differently in my classes? That leads me to the only (apparent) difference, which is race. So, that causes me to place less importance on these external forces, and to look inward. What am I doing to elicit this difference in performance among my students?

One thing I want to clarify is that I have very few students of color in my classes. In total out of 141 students, 25 are students of color. Among my students of color, three are in danger of failing (D or lower); presently, only one white student is in danger of failing. But if I look at it proportionately 12% of my students of color have this status versus less than 1% of my white students. That difference tells me that that I am not serving these students equitably.

Ayanna's internal monologue:

As I read her response, I honed in on one aspect of Suzanne's response this go-around: there were some white students that were living with some issues that

are commonly faced by students who struggle to perform well in school, and those white students were still outperforming the students of color. This did allow me to consider race as a valid lens for Suzanne to use to examine her teaching practice for herself.

The thing is, in my initial thinking about Suzanne's race lens, I may have been advocating for a "colorblind" stance. One that suggests that race may not be a useful tool in understanding the differences in performance or achievement among her students. While I do not think that colorblindness, defined by O'Brien as "an evasive position which ignores the color stratified arrangements of American society" (p. 43), is an appropriate stance for engaging in the world or education, I also push against "color'splaining"—that is explaining everything using race as a lens.

Engaging as colorblind for me suggests that a person might think that schools can operate outside of the racist systems that support white privilege in our country, while color 'splaining suggests that everything is a consequence of race even when other things have not been examined or investigated. I wonder, too, whether it is naive of me to think that something that is so much a part of my identity, as race is, can be treated as separate in some instances. Maybe all things are impacted by the interactions of race and other identities and it's up to the investigator to figure out how to make the interactions clear. I still don't know.

So, once I realized that Suzanne had considered some of the other impacts on learning and was seeing a difference in the performance of her students of color compared to her white students, I understood why, for her, using race as a lens seemed appropriate.

Ayanna responded:

This is a super thoughtful and complicated treatment of what you are seeing and working to impact. I wonder if you could look at a bright spot, a student of color that is doing well, and see if it is because of, or in spite of, you. Is there a way to calculate or tally some easy to look at things that give you a sense of observable difference between these student groups in your class? Thoughts?

Suzanne responded:

That's a good point! Personally I always look at things I'm doing as "what can be

improved” rather than “what’s working.” I think I could do this using some kind of student engagement/participation tally. Like how often do my students of color volunteer to speak in class. That would be relatively simple data to collect and then I could also see how that correlates with student performance. I think I could also solicit some of this information through conversations with school counselors.

Also, I had a really excellent and productive meeting this week with a student! We had a sit down with her counselor, one of our assistant principals and another teacher. It was actually kind of magic. I asked her what she needs from me to feel successful and included in class, and SHE TOLD ME! I was also able to express some boundaries and expectations for her in my class as well. So now we have some mutual accommodations to follow and we can see how those go.

Suzanne’s internal monologue:

What was surreal to me was that I made so much progress by implementing the simplest possible solution, speaking directly to the student. That tells me the best way for me to address race in my classroom is to continue to build trusting relationships with my students so that when I ask them what their needs are, they feel as though they can tell me, and I will listen.

Our reflections:

Ayanna:

As a Program Officer of color, I am often not sure how conversations like this will be received, especially when I am talking with a white teacher. I work hard to check my biases and assumptions, to learn about the school environment and teacher’s experiences, and to be as transparent as I can be in my quest to gain more understanding. I know that my lived experience as an African American woman who excelled in mathematics is always impacting how I understand dialogue about students of color in STEM classes. I recognize that my upbringing afforded me some privileges that make it hard for me to understand the lived experiences of others and should preclude me from trying to speak for these others. I also know that while there are times that my read on an exchange is flat out wrong, there are other times that engaging in these kinds of conversations can uncover some beliefs or assumptions that are impacting a teacher’s practice that may not have been investigated otherwise. And even with all of that,

conversations like this can and sometimes do go poorly. Sometimes that is because I haven't figured out how to ask the right question to gain more understanding and other times because the teacher isn't in a place or space to engage in a conversation of this depth. Either way, I work to grow more courageous in my interactions around questions of race and teaching to continue to improve my own understanding so that I can continue to support teachers in thinking deeply about how they might explore and analyze what they see happening in their classrooms.

Suzanne:

As a first-year teacher and a new Knowles Fellow, I am getting very used to the productive struggle that goes with learning this new career. I find that I am in a state of constant reflection about what I'm doing (e.g., planning engaging lessons, developing thoughtful assessments, building relationships with students and families, the list goes on and on) and how I can improve (e.g., give better and faster feedback, be more inclusive in my planning, sleep more, etc.). So when it comes to a complex topic like race in the classroom, it may have been easier to table that discussion until my second or third year of teaching. However, postponing the discussion about race would have hindered my ability to effectively serve my students of color. In our exchange, Ayanna provided a "safe space" for me to deconstruct and examine my ideas about race. Even though I may have been clumsy in my phrasing, I learned that I could move past that. In order to engage in tough conversations, we have to accept that from time to time we will fumble. If we say something that sounds insensitive, acknowledge it, remember it, and *continue* the dialogue. What I have taken away from this, is that a trusted colleague can be a tremendous asset when breaking down sensitive topics. I am grateful for the coaching that Knowles provides and for the opportunity to speak openly about race. I wonder what steps I can take to replicate this culture of open discussion at my school site.

References

O'Brien, E. (2000). Are we supposed to be colorblind or not? Competing frames used by whites against racism. *Race and Society*, 3(1), 41-59.