You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view.... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it. (Harper Lee, 1960)

In September, I ask my eighth graders to explain what it means to be a student of their race at our diverse middle school. We barely know each other, and this is a complicated introduction to the study of American history. It is a complication I welcome.

My African-American students tend to answer this question with a real sense of clarity. Many of them talk about being proud of their ancestors; others speak of racism that continues to exist today. A former student, reflecting on popularity, explained:

...Here are some Black girl rules. (1) Have each other’s back. (2) Never back down from a fight. (3) Don’t show off in front of your friends. (4) If new people come around, don’t change your attitude or do too much.... (11) Be real. Don’t talk about your friends behind their back.... Most of the time if you decide that you want to be in a Black girl clique, you have to go by these rules. Trying to join a Black girl clique can sometimes be hard and have a lot of problems.

In sharp contrast, my White students often struggle to answer the question. Their answers are generally more vague and rarely racialized. This year, one writes simply: “It’s fine, normal.... We don’t much talk about race.”

Another reflects:

I was born and raised in the South.... I have been made fun of a little bit because I am from there. People [think] just because I’m from the South that I’m a cowboy or redneck.... Although I am of European descent, I do not feel connected to the culture.

Young White students rarely consider explicitly the experience of being White. Although issues of identity are equally important to them, the tendency is to focus on other social markers such as gender, geography, or personal style. Most White students interpret their experiences as completely outside the realm of race. In our society, Whiteness is defined largely by what it is not; to be White is to be “normal.” Because Whiteness is not talked about explicitly, we are encouraged to pretend it does not exist.

These student writings testify to the ways in which public institutions make Whiteness invisible. While all of the students are engaging in the same curriculum and lunch period, their interpretation of the importance of race is drastically different. As a White educator, I can choose to ignore this difference in experience, allowing Whiteness to remain invisible at our school. Or, I can try to position myself as an ally to African-American students and colleagues for whom issues of race cannot be ignored. What do my African-American...
students need from me, their White teacher? How can I validate their experiences, and at the same time provide my White students with a safe space to explore their own racial identity? How do I open up conversations about race so that the students in my class can challenge their own assumptions and create new possibilities in their own identities?

Many educators today counter racism in their classrooms by preventing the symptoms (slurs, slang, put-downs, and segregation, to name a few), but this act does not transform students’ understanding of race. Often, White students learn to avoid common manifestations of racism without challenging the assumptions that underlie them; similarly, African-Americans students internalize negative messages about their academic potential without questioning the fallacy of them. A symptomatic approach to antiracism is dangerous because it creates a world where White people know to hide their stereotypes but never think to question them. Of course, this latent racism is even more dangerous for African-American students. These young people are doubly oppressed by the inability of schools to meet their needs (as evidenced in the achievement gap) and the propagation of a political climate where test scores are used to judge academic potential.

In order to unpack the assumptions that underlie racism in schools, students must be given an opportunity to see the historical progression of institutionalized racism. For White students, this means learning to acknowledge the existence of Whiteness, and its link to privilege in our society. Because acknowledging Whiteness as privilege can lead to feelings of guilt and immobility, it is helpful to provide White students with alternative models of Whiteness. Exploring examples of White antiracism is one way to help students discover the possibility of alternative and complex identities. This article will attempt to provide one method of engaging White students in thinking about their own racial identity development. In doing so, it will inevitably be a reflection of my own racial identity as a White, female teacher in a diverse classroom.

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To racial identity development theorists, the writings of my students would be far from surprising (Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong, 1997; Tatum, 1997). Most African-American students at our diverse middle school are in what psychologist William Cross refers to as the encounter stage of Black racial identity development (Cross, 1991). After years of encountering images of Blackness from both White and non-White communities, these students are integrating racialized experiences into their own sense of self. In our “liberal” school culture, young African-American students experience countless events that encourage, if not force, them to understand the effect of racism on their identity. Many of these students have grappled consciously with conflicting images of what it means to be Black in our society.

Interestingly, the same diverse school culture has not effected a change in the racial identity development of many White students. In her work, Janet Helms highlights six statuses of racial identity development among White students: contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independent, immersion/emersion and autonomy (Helms, 1990). Helm’s model takes into account the differing experiences of students whose race is invisible in American institutions. Briefly summarized, these stages range from essential colorblindness—or an inability to identify the impact of race in our personal lives—to the discovery of a positive White identity. In September, White students in my class appear to be in the contact stage of Helm’s model. They interact in a racialized world—they even identify the effect of race and racism on others—but they have yet to acknowledge the importance of race in their own identities.

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By October, our class is finishing its first history unit about the meeting of three worlds. I have randomly assigned the students to research one racial group in early America: Africans, Europeans, or American Indians. We’ve watched a few videos, looked at primary sources, and read secondary texts. The students have worked in small “race-similar” groups to research the experiences of their assigned race. It is an overambitious unit, really. One in which there is too much information crammed into too little time. In an institution of standards and testing that assumes eighth graders will remember what they learned at age 9, this is our way of reviewing America’s Roots. The role of race in this unit is particularly complicated; it is in this period of history that the laws change and “African” becomes synonymous with “slave.”

As the activity progresses, I notice an interesting phenomenon. There is an increasing pride among the African expert group. As they read about the horrors and struggles of slavery, they become progressively more attached to each other. I hear them talk about acts of resistance with honor. They are focused, sincere, and inquisitive. Of course, the students in this group are not all African American; there are Latinos, Asians, and a number of White students. It is with great sincerity that a White student yells, “Black power!” across the room.

I watch these moments play out from an observational standpoint. As a young White woman myself, I am still struggling through my own stages of racial identity development. Seeing students “play” Black power does not seem upsetting at first; I forget about how much this has to do with the commercialization of Blackness, and revel in a moment of interracial, racial pride.

The exercise ends with students presenting their own material to experts from other groups. The students, working in new groups, are supposed to share out the information from their expert group, allowing everyone to learn about each identity. It’s a jigsaw activity, intended to teach kids about sharing information cooperatively. It is not intended to be a role-play. So, when a student politely pokes me, and whispers, “Ms. Brion, Jeffrey is crying,” race is the last thing on my mind.

But Jeffrey, one of my White students, is crying. The tears are streaming down his face, and he is tense with frustration. When I approach he responds unselfconsciously, “I will not do this activity anymore! I refuse! I will not take this abuse!” I still don’t understand. “Sean has been insulting me for the past 15 minutes. I have been called slave master, plantation owner, and oppressor. I have asked him to stop, but he won’t. I have had it!” I look around. Jeffrey is sitting in a group of three White boys. One, Sean, is an African expert and a vocal participant in the Black power pride. The other, an expert in matters of the American Indian, seems baffled and amused.

Sean is horrified. “I’m sorry,” he says immediately. This is uncharacteristic for middle school students, and it checks my angry response. “It’s my fault. I was just kidding. I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry.” His sincerity is moving, actually, as he admits to a mistake of human relationship few adults can acknowledge. But Jeffrey continues to cry.

Shanice, an African-American student representing Africans in the group at the adjacent table jumps up. “He was just kidding, Jeffrey,” she says. She is trying to help, and offers to “hug on it.” But Jeffrey has already checked out. I try to process with him, try to get him to understand the misunderstanding. I want to utilize this moment to talk about the real cause of his pain. But this is too much for Jeffrey. More tears, and he is quickly hiding behind a book.

Ominous thoughts circulate through my head. I am a bad teacher. I have opened a can of worms. I have created imaginary race riots in early America. I have destroyed Jeffrey’s sense of self, and perhaps that of every other White student in the room. Clearly, I am not equipped to run this classroom. But, these thoughts are pushed aside by the more...
immediate need to find some sense of resolution before the bell rings and they all move on. How do I help my students understand the transformative potential of this pain? How do I free them from the brambles of racism and privilege that they did not create?

My immediate response is far from transformative. I do what I often do in moments of panic and confusion: I speak my own truth. I talk about my own experiences being White and learning about slavery; I talk about finding examples of White antiracists in our history. Most adults, I tell them, avoid conversations about race or struggle through them. The students acknowledge different ways that people deal with pain—humor, sadness, anger. The class agrees to keep trying to understand each other.

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In her essays, *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison outlines the ways in which White American authors have implicitly defined Whiteness through their portrayal of Blackness. Morrison highlights literature as one realm through which Americans have been able to imagine and define race (Morrison, 1992). Like other intellectual leaders, she analyzes the dangers of an identity built on the back of an “other.” Whiteness is empty, defined only by what it is not. This phenomenon hurts all of us by preventing the true development of our identities. For Whites, “it is a terrible paradox, [because] those who believe that they [can] control and define Black people [end up divesting] themselves of the power to control and define themselves” (Baldwin, 1984, p. 180).

For my African-American students, the process of imagining and defining racial identity is a daily occurrence. It happens on the way to school, in the corner store, in classrooms and lunchrooms and bus stations. It happens on television, in magazines, in the simple act of saying, “hello.” My White students have the privilege of choosing to ignore race; however, the invisibility of Whiteness in our culture is debilitating for them. They come to understand their identities as completely separate from their skin color. When asked to identify their “culture,” these students stumble and hesitate. When pushed, they name ancestral ethnicity, religion, region, or even sexuality, all of which allow them to avoid acknowledging White privilege. This is what institutionalized racism expects them to do. It is the very principle on which our power structure is based.

Without realizing it, the jigsaw activity has allowed my White students to “play” a different race, to experience belonging to a different culture. In the process of becoming an expert, my White students have begun to identify with their adopted racial group. For those who experience being African or American Indian, this exercise engenders feelings of pride and empowerment. But those who experience being White are forced to feel privilege in a new way. This activity is particularly transformative for students whose actual identity matches that of their role.

Even for those who play themselves, “playing” race, is a unique view into our own understanding of it. The typically invisible concept of Whiteness as privilege is quickly revealed in the context of early America. All of us, no matter what race, are forced to confront the effect of race on our own racial identity. But for my White students, many of whom are confronting this reality consciously for the first time, there is anonymity in the game.

When White Americans begin to see Whiteness as socially constructed privilege, they are often left with troubling questions about their racial identity. What is White, if not privilege? If privilege is invisible, then how can we effect change? And, does identifying as White mean identifying as racist? For many, these questions are debilitating.

“Playing race” allows students to ask these questions from a safe distance. Sean can escape his feelings of guilt and discomfort by “playing” African, while Jeffrey is able to mourn his character’s Whiteness in place of his own Whiteness. Still, both boys clearly
demonstrate the beginnings of Helm’s second stage: disintegration (Tatum, 1997). They begin to consciously identify the effects of racism on their own lives, as well as the lives of non-White Americans.

Furthermore, the experience gives both boys the chance to problematize Whiteness as privilege. By “acting” White privilege, Jeffrey gets to step away from prepackaged ideas about Whiteness and identify himself as a White person in opposition to this privilege. Sean, playing an African, has a similar opportunity. Both boys are able to wear their Whiteness physically while rejecting their Whiteness ideologically. In so doing, they create an alternative and complex model of Whiteness for the other students in our class.

Even for adults, it is quite complicated to identify ideologically as antiracist, while identifying physically as White. Becky Thompson and her colleagues eloquently discuss this challenge in their article, “Home/Work: Antiracism Activism and the Meaning of Whiteness.” They write:

Whiteness is confusing and complex, partly because white people are symbols and individuals at the same time. We identify that we are white (as description) and we experience privilege (based on racial hierarchy) as we confront the absurdity of an invented ideological system that bases power on descriptive differences. We must claim a reality (that we have white skin) and deal with the unearned privileges as we show that the hierarchy is, itself, an invention. (1997, p. 357)

To deal with this multiplicity of experience, the women choose to identify different realms of their Whiteness: Whiteness as description (skin color), Whiteness as experience (unearned privilege), and Whiteness as ideology (a system of exploitation based on White supremacy). Some group members begin to refer to themselves as “antiracist racists.” This term qualifies their experiences as institutionally privileged Whites (a racism we cannot escape) with the ideology of wanting to fight this racism.

Sean and Jeffrey, lacking the language and experience that they need, identify themselves as antiracist racists by their sheer acceptance of frustration. In their willingness to feel, act, confront, and “play,” these young men grapple with a problem that the rest of us have spent years simply trying to name.

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What happens when all of the people involved in a racial misunderstanding are White? In our classroom, this experience allowed the African-American students to step in as the experts. Having felt and thought about race carefully, these students came forward to try to facilitate the healing. Shanice, for example, brought reality back into our “game” when she offered to help Sean (playing African) resolve the conflict. In addition, the experience gave our classroom community the opportunity to imagine Whiteness in new ways.

By mid-November, we are ready to discuss this experience more openly. We have all had some distance, a chance to breathe. There have been many more moments of courage and sensitivity in our classroom. It seems an appropriate time to revisit the issue. I ask the students to think about the experience of our first unit. Already, we are deep into the American Revolution; we have spent several days mulling over the hypocrisy of slave owners fighting for freedom.

In their reflections, White students share their own feelings of sadness and confusion. Sean writes, “I did not feel proud at all, knowing that my people owned slaves.” Jeffrey is more literal, “I felt like everyone who wasn’t in my group was against me.” A third White student writes, “I felt proud that some White people were fighting against slavery. I believe I would have been one of those people.”
Their honesty makes me want to share my own experiences growing up in a diverse school. Perhaps, this is selfish. I talk about feeling ashamed and not knowing how to be White. Some of my African-American students are fascinated. “Why did you feel bad?” they ask. “It wasn’t your fault.” I try to explain in a way that will not further isolate my White students. I am careful; I know that my experiences with race are, inevitably, affecting these stories. I am afraid of my power, but also excited by their honesty. I talk about my own search for White antiracist role models.

We read about Thomas Jefferson. They know his name, but are shocked to find out that Jefferson himself was a slave owner riddled with guilt and confusion about the issue of slavery. Jefferson (1788) wrote, 

Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.... But it is impossible to be temperate and to pursue this subject through the various considerations of policy, of morals, of history natural and civil. We must be contented to hope they will force their way into every one’s mind. (p. 173)

The first step is to know that there are others who have struggled, White and Black. Racism hurts all of us; pain can be transformative.

Throughout the year, we will talk about different models of Whiteness in history. I will tell them about Whiteness as description, experience, and ideology. When we talk about slavery, we will also talk about examples of interracial activism: slaves and indentured servants who run away together or resist; individuals who collaborate to write newspapers. We will spend some time looking at the ways in which different Americans, White and Black, became involved in the Underground Railroad. While conductors risked their lives, station masters risked jail time, and sponsors remained completely anonymous. These examples provide multiple models of antiracism with differing levels of personal involvement. I hope my students will use them to think critically about the kind of ideologies that they want to embrace.

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Giving students the opportunity to think critically about race and racism in the context of school is not an easy task. The ability to question structures of power is not a skill-set written into our curriculum or standards. Furthermore, even when we provide students with opportunities to change their attitude, we are not directly changing the outcomes that play out in their lives. Many educators would argue it is more important to strengthen the academic performance of African-American students than to broaden the perceptions of those around them. While I acknowledge that changing attitudes does not change structures of power, I believe deeply that both are necessary for urban youth to understand their place in the context of race. Supporting self-reflection and critical thinking among young people opens up doors of possibility; possibility is necessary for change.

In a letter written to his nephew, James Baldwin once suggested that White Americans are scared to lose their sense of identity. He wrote:

[White people] are in effect still trapped in a history they do not understand; and, until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that Black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is
to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans is the loss of their identity. (Quoted in Groot & Marcus, 1998, p. 5)

As educators, it is our responsibility to provide young White Americans with alternative and hybrid identities. Otherwise, fear will overpower their youthful desire for justice. By giving students the freedom to experience and imagine different models of Whiteness, we create the possibility for multifaceted identities. Using American history to explore Whiteness, perhaps my students will be able to better piece together their own ideas about privilege and power in our society.

Notes

1. All student names have been changed to protect privacy.
2. These labels can be credited to group member Patti DeRosa (Thompson, 1997, p. 357).
3. Ibid.

References