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Racism in the Classroom

It is 7:00pm on a cold winter night. I call my friends and ask them if they can give me a lift, but all of them are busy. I begin my long hike from Teacher’s College all the way to Eden. All I keep my mind on is how long I have until I reach the safety and warmth of my own house (16 minutes and counting). As I walk through campus, I catch people’s eyes as they walk by, they smile at me and continue to their destination. As I wait for the crosswalk to cross Jefferson I turn up my IPod. My parents always have told me to never walk this route alone at night, but how else were supposed to get home. As the light turns and I cross Jefferson the friendly atmosphere of campus is gone (10 minutes and counting).

As I continue to walk my intuition kicks in. A chill runs down my back and the hairs on the back of my neck begin to stand, someone is behind me. I do not want to look back so I begin to look at the sidewalk to see shadows and sure enough someone is right behind me. I turn up my music and begin to walk more quickly. The person begins to follow my pace (6 minutes and counting). I am too scared to look behind me so I begin to come up with in my mind a picture of who is behind me. I automatically see a large black man with many tattoos carrying some sort of weapon. This image scares me even more (4 minutes and counting). I begin wondering if I should go into my actual house where I would be alone or continue walking to a public place.

I turn up my drive way, and walk to the front door. The person who I thought was following me continued walking. I turned around to catch a glimpse of them in case they decided to come back. I was astonished it was a measly Caucasian little girl that stood no taller than five foot two. I had never thought of myself as racist or of having racist tendencies until that moment. What had made me generalize and picture what I did? What made me assume that this person had to be African American?

For this reason I have had a difficult beginning to write this essay. How am I supposed to discuss racism in the classroom and how I would combat it if I myself was so quick to generalize? Racism is a difficult topic to discuss not because people are unknowledgeable of the issue but because although many believe it no longer exists it is still running rampant through our society and our schools.

In society racism does not exist as segregation instead it exists in the thoughts and generalizations that people hold. Me generalizing about the race of the person following me was a great example of this. Media plays a large role in where these generalizations come from. These generalizations can also be passed down from the views that our ancestors held many years ago. So as teachers how do we break these walls that have been introduced to our students their whole lives?

There are many ways that we can address and make sure that racism does not affect the students of our classroom. A great way to address it in a secondary or an older class I think would be to address it like we did in our Schooling and Teaching class. I feel that with older students who may already have their preconceived notions we should just have an open discussion about the matter. We can ask students how they view themselves and the other students of the class. We can then discuss how we truly think the thought of skin color matters or does not matter when it comes to judging the persons character and ability to perform in the class. We can also discuss skin color affects how they will interact with each other in the class. I believe that this open discussion will do what it did in our classroom. It showed us that color is different to different people and that it truly has no meaning in determining who we are as learners, people, or co teachers. This discussion in our class worked to make us see each other not by color but by other characteristics and worked to bring us closer together. I feel that in a secondary classroom this discussion will work to do the same thing. It will break the ice and bring students closer to each other.

For a primary classroom the thought of open discussion about race would not have the same affects because some students in this age range would not comprehend the topic in the way that the high schoolers would. In my classroom I am planning on using the same strategy that my parents used with me. I am planning on giving my students time to pick on their own what color that they think they are. I will then ask them various questions about why they picked the color and why they see themselves as that color? What them being that color means to them?

Someone will inevitably pick a color that is not white, black, brown, or beige (what people say they are). They will maybe say something like I did in class when I said that I was yellow. I will then ask them the same questions. The point in the lesson is that color is transitory. That people should not be judged by the color of their skin, rather by their personality and who they are as a person. I feel that where some students may laugh that a child picked an outrageous color by the end of the lesson I could convince them that it is not a choice that is uncommon but that this student wants to be seen by their personality and not by their skin. Then, I will allow the students to pick what color they are this time hoping that this time instead of picking what color their skin color is they will pick what color they want others to see them as and why they want others to see them as.

I hope that by showing students early on that skin color does not matter will help them to break down generalizations that they have been previously taught. As they grow they will be able to pass these views to others and eventually to their students. I know that this is a farfetched idea, but one day people will not see skin in the judgments that they make of a person rather they will make these decisions based off of the qualities of the person themselves.