



Why #BlackLivesMatter in Your Classroom Too

by Cornelius Minor

I have a simple job. It has two easy mandates.

1. Love children with good teaching.
2. Love their teachers by supporting them with good stuff to teach with.

I work in classrooms all over the world. When there are pieces of your heart in far flung corners of the globe, a powerful kind of empathy grows. When communities hurt, I hurt.

When Trayvon Martin was murdered in Florida, I thought of the children I serve there. I thought of the books they like and the jokes they tell me when I get to town. I remembered his school and his teachers. I thought of his community and especially of his family that has had to find light in the traumatic void his absence creates. On some mornings, when I am particularly sensitive or tired, I can see his classroom. His empty desk haunts my dreams.

When the same thing happened with Mike Brown and Tamir Rice, a significant part of me broke. These names are not headlines or hashtags to me. These were children who read the books my colleagues and I suggested and wrote the essays we asked them to write. These are children who trusted us with their futures. Our system betrayed that trust.

I've worked in schools my entire career. The death of a student or family member is not a new occurrence to me. It is painful every single time. But I heal.

These recent wounds, however, are kept fresh not just by the regularity of these murders, but that they are carried out by agents of the state or their proxies and that they happen almost exclusively to black and brown children, to their siblings, to their mothers and to their fathers.

When educators talk about racism our conversation is often limited to individual acts of personal bias. As long as we don't know any mean or intolerant people, **we are complacent in our thinking that these problems are not ours to contend with. Such a stance ignores the systemic complexities of how race is lived in America, on its streets and in our classrooms—and even when there are no people of color present.**

Becoming more systemically aware means understanding the kinds of racism that shape our communities, schools, and classrooms, and where we stand in relation to those social forces.

Most people are aware of individual racism. If we choose to talk about race, it is what we spend most of our time talking about, but few understand how it works. There are two kinds of individual racism. The first kind of individual racism is *internalized racism*. These are all the conscious and subconscious racial biases, prejudices, and blind spots that we all have within ourselves as individuals.

The second kind of individual racism is *interpersonal racism*. This is what happens when we act out the biases we internalize on others. Most of us are sensitive enough to avoid acting out our internalized racism, but as humans, our biases, prejudices and blind spots are most likely to emerge when we are tired, stressed, late, scared or feel threatened. As educators we are tired quite regularly and stressed daily, so the work of avoiding interpersonal racism is real and significant, but it is not all.

There are also two kinds of *systemic racism*. The first kind—*institutional racism*—is the collection of racist policies and discriminatory practices in schools, government agencies, and workplaces that routinely produces unjust outcomes for people of color. These words may be new to us, but as teachers we are intimately familiar with this kind of racism. This is the “achievement gap.” This is the testing industrial complex. This is school discipline.

Let’s consider this: if there were an activity at school that resulted in the mass failure of kids with green eyes, we would not criminalize the kids with green eyes. We would ask, “What is it about this activity that excludes kids with green eyes?” and we would change the activity. Are we, as members of the education community, willing to do this for black boys who are suspended at rates that are exponentially more in comparison to their peers? What could this look like? If sitting in a desk all day listening to lectures leads to mass suspensions for a specific subset of kids, I need to get with my team and change the activity. To engage in this imaginative work—even if it is messy—is antiracist. It affirms that black lives do matter.

The second kind of systemic racism—*structural racism*—is the unjust patterns and practices that play out across societal institutions. It is the reality that those suspended black boys miss out on valuable instructional time and consequently miss out on opportunities that lead to college. It is the reality that this boy’s earning potential over a lifetime is now a paltry percentage of his college educated peers. It is the knowledge that this reduced earning diminishes quality of life. To be antiracist is to know that all of these things are connected and to know that many of them start in school even when we express no interpersonal racism.

All of our students matter, but in a society characterized by its dogged refusal to treat all kids and their families equally, it is our moral imperative to affirm that black lives matter. If outcomes continue to be bleak for large groups of people, it diminishes the quality of all our lives. When there is massive disenfranchisement fueled by widespread failure and incarceration, the safety of all our communities is compromised.

In our search for solutions, people utter platitudes disguised as answers—*we should love one another, I don’t see color or race, let’s talk more*—and all of those things are lovely and important *starts*, but they alone will not change the systems that routinely produce unjust outcomes. To continue with business as usual, to do nothing, to be “neutral” is a passive declaration of racism because the system that we are most intimately connected with—school—will continue to produce unjust outcomes for people of color. To be antiracist is to be actively involved with the disruption of these systems.

What is our influence, as educators?

What can we do? We cannot reconstruct the world to reflect our views, but we are in a unique position to take action in our classrooms. We can start to disrupt the status quo by asking ourselves questions about our practice, community and curriculum. When I’m working in teams with other teachers, here are some initial questions we use to imagine what our disruption can look like.

1. **Safety.** In order for students to learn, they need to feel safe. How can I make sure that my classroom is a place where children feel safe and protected? Can I ensure the sustained management of the room while communicating respect (without cultivating fear, embarrassment or teacher dependence)?
2. **Choice.** Children read more when they feel capable and motivated. How can I create access to reading material that is high interest and appropriately challenges kids? How can I create consistent opportunities to do work that has both meaning and consequence?
3. **Voice.** When students have a voice, they feel empowered. When so much of childhood is about staying quiet and listening to adults, how can we give students a platform to talk, to write, to share what is important to them? How can we help them be heard by the constituencies that matter the most to them? Who are those people, can we get them to the classroom, and how can we communicate with them?
4. **Growth.** Learning is not an identical process for all kids; we cannot treat it as if it is. Where are my students now? Honestly. Where can they be by the end of the week? What kind of teaching and practice will it take for them to get there? How can I best facilitate progress—small groups, out of classroom activities, labs, centers, discussions, home visits? How can I measure progress? What tools might kids need *in addition to* what I have planned so that they may succeed? Do all kids need that tool?
5. **Flexibility.** Children and communities are changing all the time. What do we need to read to be more responsive to our kids and communities? Who do we need to learn from? What is the best way to share that learning with other teachers? How can we put that learning into action? Day to day, what can this kind of professional growth look like for us?

There is no right answer; rather, it's the questions that help us think about what actions or changes might lead to better outcomes for all of our students, particularly those who are underserved by traditional schooling. Being an advocate for black lives does not mean that I am an advocate against any other lives. When we make the conscious decision to address persisting injustices, this broadens access to justice for everyone.



Cornelius Minor is a frequent keynote speaker for and staff developer at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. In that capacity, he works with teachers, school leaders, and leaders of community-based organizations to support deep and wide literacy reform in cities (and sometimes villages) across the globe. Whether working with teachers and young people in Singapore, Seattle, or New York City, Cornelius always uses his love for technology, hip-hop, and social media to recruit students' engagement in reading and writing and teachers' engagement in communities of practice.

Questions for Muir:

What stood out to you in the article?

How is our academic program reflected in his words?

What about our discipline (from suspensions to sitting/being in the hallways)?

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So, what will we do within our own school systems to disrupt the status quo?

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