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On Spotighting and Ignoring Racial Group Members in the Classroom

Dorinda J. Carter

The experience of being Black in a majority-White environment affects Black students in both harmful and helpful ways. Often, these students are simultaneously affirmed and devalued as Black students and both included and isolated in classrooms. A Black student constantly wonders if and how race is operating in her daily treatment, which can have negative psychological and academic effects.

I attended predominantly White schools from grades eight through twelve in Stone Mountain, Georgia. In the late 1980s, my parents enrolled me in the Minority-to-Majority busing program, believing that my sister and I would receive a better education in a racially integrated environment. Attending predominantly White schools had many benefits: access to highly qualified teachers, current textbooks and technology, field trips that introduced me to the social and cultural capital of mainstream America, extracurricular activities, advanced placement and honors courses. But the experience entailed emotional challenges. I was acutely aware of my minority status. As a high-achieving Black student, I was often referred to by teachers as “the only one” or “one of few” in this category, which characterized me as succeeding despite their expectations. In the classroom, I was not always allowed to be an individual, but was often defined by my racial group membership. More often than not, I felt compelled to speak and behave in ways that would situate me as the representative of my racial group.

This racial framing of me as a Black student who was more likely to fail than to achieve forced me to worry about many things. I often wondered if my White peers thought my work was comparable to their own. I wondered if a teacher marked an A on my paper because the work met his standards for the assignment or if he thought this was the best a Black student could do. I sometimes hesitated to answer questions posed by the teacher, wondering if anyone would deem my response inadequate coming from my Black body. Yet, when I was not asked to share my ideas with the class, I wondered if it was because the teacher felt that a Black person had little to add to the discussion. I wondered if I was invisible in the classroom. I sometimes

wondered if the teacher called on me to answer a question so that I would not feel marginalized or silenced as a Black student.

The questions that plagued me at school represent the kind of “race wrestling”¹ that Black students often engage in while navigating predominantly White schools. Although race is not necessarily always on the mind of any individual student of color, my experiences resemble those documented by educational researchers who study the experiences of Black students in predominantly White public, private, and elite school settings.² Teachers in any demographic situation must consciously consider how treating students as racial group members in classrooms may be helpful and/or harmful to the learning process.

Figuring out when it is helpful or harmful to spotlight Black students *as Black* or to ignore Black students’ racial identities is a true dilemma facing classroom teachers today. Often, teachers are unaware of classroom moments when Black students perceive that they are being treated as racial beings when they do not want to be, or when Black students perceive that they are being *ignored* because they are Black or treated as “just a student” when they want their experience to be acknowledged in racial terms. How does a teacher know when to racialize and when not to racialize Black students so as not to cause them harm and to value their presence equally? These are essential questions with no prescriptive answers.

Here I address the dilemma of spotlighting and ignoring as it relates to the experiences of Black students in predominantly white high schools. Although my research focuses on high-achieving students, students at all achievement levels report wrestling with race-related worries in the classroom. Teachers who work in other demographic settings and with students at other achievement levels can also benefit from understanding the ramifications of racially spotlighting and racially ignoring students of color in an educational environment.

When a Black student perceives that he is being positioned as racially hypervisible, particularly by a White teacher or White students, this is racial spotlighting. When a Black student perceives that she is being positioned as racially invisible in the classroom, particularly by a White teacher or White students, when she desires to be visible *as* a racial group member or to be visible, period, this is racial ignoring. My use of these terms is informed by Mica Pollock’s research in a California high school in which adults in the school both focused negatively on Black students and actively ignored them.³ I expand these ideas to focus on Black students’ perceptions of their racialization in the classroom and their desires to be perceived in racial or nonracial terms in different situations. In my research, I found that students perceived that their White teachers and White peers racially spotlighted and racially ignored them in classroom situations, making them feel alternately hypervisible and invisible.⁴ These feelings impeded academic engagement

and led some Black students to remain silent in class discussion or resist homework assignments.

One way in which students describe experiencing racial spotlighting is by being positioned by White teachers and White peers as native informants. The Black feminist cultural critic bell hooks describes spotlighting in which the person of color is objectified and cast in the role of racial spokesperson.⁵ When class discussion centers on her racial group, the student's perception is that White peers and the teacher expect her to share the experience that is being discussed and explain whatever they do not understand. For example, during a classroom discussion of a racial profiling incident that occurred in another high school, a Black male student was asked by his teacher to relate the incident to his own life; he felt that "her question was kinda weird."⁶ Many Black students report being positioned as native informants during class discussions of racially sensitive topics. When slavery was discussed in history or English class, one student said, "It always makes me feel uncomfortable being the only African American student in the classroom. . . . like, it feels weird because people ask me questions about it, and like, how do you figure that I would know more about it? I'm learning the same thing you are, and it just makes me feel funny."⁷ Another student reported that, during discussions about Africans and European colonialism, "I'm expected to know everything . . . I guess they [Whites] assume just cuz we're Black that we know everything about Africa, what went on in Africa."⁸ In these instances, students perceive that their White peers and teachers focus uninvited attention on them to provide an expert opinion on topics that involve African Americans simply because they identify or are identified as members of that racial group.

These students experience physical and psychological discomfort in the classroom as a result of this spotlighting. Hypervisibility can have serious academic consequences: one student silenced herself in the classroom for fear that if she spoke out she would have the "wrong answer" as a Black person. When White peers or the teacher assume that having a Black identity makes anyone an expert on "Blackness," Black students are burdened by being asked to explain a history that may have little to do with their own experiences. The native informant form of racial spotlighting disregards Black students' complex identities.

Racial spotlighting also arose during English class discussions of racially sensitive literature (see also Chadwick, Chapter 36). Black students reported being the target of stares from their White peers when Jim, the African American character in *Huckleberry Finn*, was discussed. One boy reported, "it felt kinda awkward as they were discussing it, cuz, um . . . you know . . . it took place back in the 1800s, so he was treated kind of like a slave or a lesser human being . . . and it just felt kinda like their eyes were on me when there was a discussion around the Jim character. I saw them looking at me."⁹ As this student pondered whether or not his peers equated Jim's life experiences with his own, his peers' stares made him feel hypervisible in the classroom, which caused

great anxiety. “I just didn’t feel like saying much of anything. The teachers, like, brush it off quickly and move to another topic.”¹⁰ This student noticed that his teacher was aware of other students staring at him, but she did nothing.

Racial spotlighting that is negative, reductive, or simply unwanted creates physical and psychological discomfort that limits students’ engagement in the learning process. Teachers can reduce the negative effects of racial spotlighting by consistently monitoring this dimension of their instructional behaviors. Teachers should also be conscious of the verbal and visual interactions occurring between students during classroom discussions of racially sensitive material. Rather than live in fear that all treatment of Black students as Black is harmful or racist, teachers should remember that when racial spotlighting affirms individuals as members of racial groups in ways they desire, and when questions about racial group experiences allow people to voice a position they want to express, it can be helpful to the teaching and learning process. In these instances, students feel valued.

The teacher who seeks anxiously to ignore Black students’ identities or experiences as Black students runs the risk of ignoring Black students themselves. That is, she risks creating an atmosphere where she nervously avoids interactions with Black students, and where Black students feel invisible or feel that their contributions are dismissed because they are Black. A young man in my study reported that the White teacher did not recognize him when he raised his hand during class discussion. He spoke to the teacher to change the situation. “It does make a difference, you know? Even that little thing proves something to me, you know?”¹¹ Another young woman described a classroom experience in which her peers exacerbated her feeling of invisibility. She and a White student made the same comment, but the White student received affirmation from her peers after speaking:

I don’t know what their problem is. I don’t know if it’s because I don’t talk as much . . . they might think I’m wrong or something. It’s annoying after a while—that I would say it, and they would all pretend that they’re thinking about it or whatever. Then somebody else [a White student] would say it, and it’s like, “oh yeah, write it down.” And it’s like I just said that five minutes ago! It’s upsetting, aggravating, because it doesn’t happen just one time. It happens more than once. And I feel like my answer is not good enough coming from me or something like that.¹²

This incident resulted in the student being less vocal in the class. A Black student whose voice is invalidated during a class discussion or who is never called upon when his or her hand is raised feels invisible; he or she wants to be acknowledged just like other students as having valuable thoughts about the topic at hand and is likely to interpret the ignoring as occurring because he or she is Black. Remedying this problem sometimes requires making certain to

call equally on a student so that she or he can voice an individual position that she chooses to express.

Teachers and students may perceive how race is operating in their interactions differently. A teacher cannot always predict when a Black student will perceive actions as racially motivated. Neither can a teacher assume that race will be salient for all students of color in the same way or at the same moments. Nonetheless, a teacher can ensure that she is attempting to be antiracist by being more conscious about the dynamics of racial spotlighting and racial ignoring. After monitoring classroom interactions, the educator might attend to students of color to counteract ignoring, and ignore students' racial group membership to counteract spotlighting. Flexibility is central to antiracist instruction; as long as the educator consciously considers whether her moves are harmful or helpful to the student in the learning process, she will do better by her students. This minefield must be navigated constantly, so keep asking yourself and others about it.

RESOURCES

Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University. 1992. *Race in the Classroom: The Multiplicity of Experience* [Motion Picture]. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University. bokcenter.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Principle:** Since both spotlighting and ignoring students as racial group members can be harmful, Carter suggests that educators primarily must remain conscious of the potential of both types of harm. What do you make of her conclusion that “flexibility” is the answer?
2. **Strategy:** Can you think of a time when you or someone you know felt racially spotlighted or racially ignored in a classroom? What could the teacher have done differently in this situation?
3. **Try tomorrow:** How could you start an open inquiry with a student, to examine his or her experience of your classroom interactions? How could you avoid further “spotlighting” the student in this inquiry? Role-play the interaction.

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