

# 10

## CREATING A CLIMATE FOR CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS SOUNDING OUT

### Contextual Analysis

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In the case “Sounding Out,” we see a teacher, Ms. Pollitt, use her position as a Multisensory Reading instructor to create critical conversations about race and justice in her classroom. In this chapter, I will analyze the classroom context through several theoretical frameworks. I will first highlight how school climate, particularly the school climate around race and culture, shaped what the teacher and students brought to the classroom and how their actions within the classroom shaped student outcomes. The second theory is critical consciousness, and the chapter will explain how Ms. Pollitt helped her White students and her student of color become more aware of societal issues and feel empowered to make change.

### **School Climate and School Racial Climate**

My analysis will focus on how the school climate shaped the experience and resulted in greater critical consciousness for students. *School climate* refers to the values, norms, practices, and relationships within a school (Zullig et al., 2010). One can think of the climate as the “personality” of a school, or what makes it unique from other schools. Everyone has a role to play in shaping the climate, from administrators who set policy, to teachers who deliver instruction, to students who establish their cliques and friend groups. Furthermore, everyone is affected by the climate. Research has established that a positive school climate is associated with better academic, social, and psychological outcomes for students (Wang & Degol, 2016). School climate is relatively stable over time but can change as individuals move in and out of the school, in addition to changing through intentional efforts.

Scholars have identified several aspects of school climate, including (1) beliefs, values, and norms; (2) relationships and social interactions; and (3) safety and

environmental characteristics (Wang & Degol, 2016). This case calls to mind a specific aspect of the school climate known as the *school racial climate*, which is the aspect of climate related to how individuals relate across cultural and ethnic-racial groups as well as messages about race and culture (Byrd, 2017). Teachers and administrators in schools like Ryend often fail to notice the racial climate. The students are overwhelming White, the curriculum includes some, but not a lot, of discussion about historical discrimination, and racial tension is not evident—Nivia’s stories about microaggressions involve experiences in the neighborhood, not her classrooms. It is likely that, in this school, people believe that race is “not a problem,” meaning race is not salient because there is no overt racial discomfort.

Nevertheless, every school has a racial climate. In my work (Byrd, 2017) racial climate is divided into two major domains. The first domain is intergroup interactions, meaning how often individuals interact across ethnic-racial lines and the quality of those interactions. At a school like Ryend, interracial interaction is probably very infrequent because there are so few students of color. While not mentioned, it is likely that the teachers are overwhelmingly White, as well—79% of public school teachers are (Hussar et al., 2020). So opportunities to interact across groups are rare, but when they do happen, nothing in the case suggests such interactions are negative. Ms. Pollitt’s biracial student is as open to a relationship with her as the White students. On average, 94% of Latinx adolescents and 90% of Black adolescents have experienced racial discrimination (Umaña-Taylor, 2016) and those in negative school climates are often reluctant to trust teachers they feel are prejudiced and discriminatory (Price et al., 2019). Instead of mistrusting Ms. Pollitt, Nivia feels comfortable enough to express her desire to talk more about racism at school. These facts suggest that, though infrequent, cross-racial interactions are positive.

This brings us to our second domain of school racial climate: *ethnic-racial socialization*, which refers to the messages—explicit and implicit—conveyed about race and culture. These messages occur through the curriculum, holiday celebrations, and informal conversations teachers have with students. Schools can promote a variety of socialization messages. For example, they can help students learn about their own histories and traditions and about the histories and traditions of other ethnic-racial groups.

Ethnic-racial socialization messages are also evident through what teachers *don’t* say about race and culture. For Nivia, conversations about race had been previously limited to discussions about *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which led her to believe that racial topics had to be limited to “specific class readings or units” (p. 9). Many schools limit discussion of race and culture, and some teach students to actively ignore the role of race in their lives and society. Known as *colorblind socialization*, these messages are in contrast to more positive messages that might focus on valuing everyone equally. Colorblindness is a perspective which claims that racial equality has been achieved while dismissing evidence of ongoing racism (Gallagher, 2015). Colorblind messages prevent students from becoming

culturally competent (Walton et al., 2014) and can reduce academic outcomes for students of color (Byrd, 2015).

At Ryend we see some efforts to discuss race as well as some silence around race. Nivia is most aware of the silence around race, which is expected, as students of color tend to find race more salient in their identities and interactions (Syed & Juang, 2014). Every individual's perception of the school climate is informed by their unique experiences and beliefs. Therefore, it is not unusual that Nivia had a different perspective from her classmates. It is important for teachers to honor students' perceptions, even if one disagrees with them. Ms. Pollitt first had a defensive reaction to Nivia's comment that the school did not discuss race enough. Instead of dismissing her student's viewpoint, however, Ms. Pollitt acknowledged how her own background influenced her perceptions of the climate. She was open to challenging herself and her students and sought out ways to teach her students more about race and racism. As a result, she deepened her students' learning and their relationships with her.

## Effects of School Racial Climate

Research has found that learning about race and racism is beneficial for students of all ages and races (e.g., Byrd, 2016; Priest et al., 2014). We can see impacts on all three students. Nivia learned that her teacher valued her ethnic-racial background and was willing to acknowledge her racialized experiences. Furthermore, she had the opportunity to think about how to cope with microaggressions like the one she experienced months after reading *Dear Martin*. Instead of keeping the experience to herself, she sought out social support by sharing the experience with Ms. Pollitt. Seeking social support is an important strategy that can decrease the negative effects of discrimination (Houshmand, 2017).

Though Chloe's initial interest in the book was on the relationship drama, she becomes deeply engaged, reading and listening to the book ahead of her class and selecting the next book for them to read. In addition to being more interested in reading, the two White students were able to recognize their own biases and false beliefs about reverse discrimination. Understanding one's privilege is a necessary step in developing cultural competence, which is awareness, knowledge, and skills that are helpful for having positive interactions with people from diverse backgrounds (Sue & Torino, 2005). Finally, all three students also sought to learn more about racism and racial justice.

## Developing Critical Consciousness

Ms. Pollitt's class shows that it is just as important for White students to understand race and racism as it is for students of color. Creating an equitable society requires all individuals to recognize their biases, acknowledge structural oppression, and commit to sustainable actions. *Critical consciousness* refers to how individuals learn

to critically analyze social inequality and act to change it (Watts et al., 2011). It consists of three components, the first of which is *critical reflection*, or the ability to recognize structural inequality in society. By reading *Dear Martin* and discussing redlining in their community, Ms. Pollitt helped the students become aware of racism not only as something that exists between individuals but also as something that permeates societal institutions. Gaining this awareness is an essential first step in promoting students' ability to work to improve society. However, students also must develop *agency*, which is the sense that they can and want to make change. Learning about racism and other forms of oppression can feel overwhelming and trigger negative emotions (Hardiman et al., 2007; Matias, 2014). To those with newly developed critical awareness, it may feel that, as individuals, they can do little to impact long-embedded systems. However, by studying history and the successful actions of others, youth can appreciate their roles as potential change agents (Watts et al., 2011). The final component is *critical action*, which involves individual and collective behaviors aimed at addressing inequality. There are a number of ways to get involved in activism. Aldana et al. (2019) worked with youth to identify three forms of anti-racist action. Interpersonal action includes individual responses, such as challenging friends who make racial jokes or defending targets of racism. Communal action involves collective actions at school or in the community, such as attending club meetings or participating with committees focused on issues of race and/or racism. Finally, political change action includes engagement with politicians and participating in protests. School ethnic-racial socialization messages contribute directly to forms of anti-racist action (Bañales et al., 2019).

## How Schools Can Promote Critical Consciousness

In this final section, I will use Ms. Pollitt's actions as a case for how schools can promote critical consciousness in students. First, it is important that Ms. Pollitt acknowledged and addressed her own discomfort. As noted, racial topics can engender feelings of defensiveness, guilt, and fear, especially for those who are White (Johnson, 2017). Ms. Pollitt reports having these feelings "for days" (p. 5) after Nivia's comments. However, her commitment to being a culturally responsive teacher was enough to move her past those negative feelings. Those wanting to achieve equity in society must have the strength to persevere through obstacles in order to achieve the benefits of open conversations.

Next, Ms. Pollitt was uncertain about how to approach the topic. Discussing racism was uncommon at Ryend. Many teachers see a literature or history class as the only appropriate place for such discussions, especially in predominantly White communities (de Waal-Lucas, 2006). Ms. Pollitt's coursework was focused on the specific practices of teaching MSR, not culture. Furthermore, she had not yet considered how to integrate the social justice concepts from her doctoral work into her practice. Thus, Ms. Pollitt had no support or training in how to

introduce the topic into her course. Furthermore, she worried that her White students would be “uncomfortable” (p. 7) noticing that the author of their book is Black, and was likely worried about their reaction to other aspects of the discussion as well. Students of all races, but especially White students, can have difficulty accepting content about racism (for a summary of negative reactions, see Byrd, 2021). Finally, Ms. Pollitt feared that she “did not know enough” because she was a White woman raised in a predominantly White town.

That White people who have grown up in non-diverse areas do not “know” about race is a myth. White people can effectively use their knowledge of race to serve their own ends (Hamad, 2020), just as the White woman in *To Kill a Mockingbird* did. Rains (1998) also noted that White women do not hesitate to teach Shakespeare despite not being men or British. However, because their knowledge may be more implicit, White people may need to work harder to uncover it. Thus, the first task for White people who want to teach about racism is to acknowledge the subtle messages they learned throughout their life and the way those messages have affected them. Ms. Pollitt is able to start this process and encourage it in her students. After beginning this process, teachers must educate themselves on the ways racism has manifested in history and current times, as Ms. Pollitt did when she learned about redlining from the history teacher.

Second, teachers must understand how to honor the voices of their students of color but not target or tokenize them. Nivia was a student who was eager to talk about her experiences with microaggressions, but not all students of color will be interested in sharing negative experiences or being in a teaching role. Such experiences can be draining and students may fear backlash from other students (Jackson, 1999; Pieterse et al., 2016). Additionally, spotlighting students may place inappropriate pressure on youth who have not fully developed their own ethnic-racial identity and critical consciousness. Some students of color have colorblind attitudes and internalized racism and are just as in need of critical reflection as White students. An effective way to introduce the perspectives of people of color without singling out students is to use videos or narratives designed to speak to these issues. For example, the New York Times recently released a set of mini-films of youth speaking about their experiences with race and racism (Gonchar, 2017). An instructor can also invite a guest speaker who can speak to experiences in the local community.

Connecting with the local community is another important strategy. Students need to understand that past and current racism affects their neighborhoods and schools. To accomplish this, classes can analyze the history, demographics, and policies of local institutions. Ms. Pollitt began this work by talking with her students about redlining, but she also could have assigned the students to do their own research on their neighborhoods.

Finally, teachers must stay current. Thinking and research about race and racism are frequently changing. News reports highlight big events, but the effects of racism are evident in much smaller, everyday ways. One of the students

commented, “What [Nic Stone] wrote about is what our life has become.” Stone was able to tell the story in *Dear Martin* because before George Floyd, there was Trayvon Martin, and before Trayvon Martin, there was Emmett Till. Critical conversations must be ongoing until justice truly prevails.

## Further Reading

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