Handle With Care Box by Robbie Wood
Middle School History

HANDLE WITH CARE:
ANTI-RACIST TEACHING IN A WHITE SCHOOL

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Don't Rock the Boat
The ship — a symbol of progress, movement, and exploration. When it comes to race and racism, white teachers are told not to “rock the boat” too much. How will my administrators respond? What pushback will I get from parents? Other teachers? It is easier for a white teacher to stay the course and not try to disturb calm waters with radical and anti-racist teaching practices. But if white teachers don’t engage white students with topics of race and racism, whose job does it then become?

Asking questions like: Who built the boat (system) we are traveling on? Who is it structured for? What is our destination, and who decided that? Are we critical for white teachers to begin to move beyond complacency.

Students will learn to reflect on our nation’s history of oppression.
The Ways that I Lifted Up and Failed White Fragility and White Dominance
Silence when it comes to the term “race” and “racism”.
Creating a question from a worksheet about Andrew Jackson’s teacher pictures. Asking about “white supremacy” without even gapping with who first phrase means.
Describing oppression without ever mentioning “race”.
The constant switch from talk about Lewis and Clark.

Three are a few of the ways my teaching started to uphold white fragility around race and racism and the dominance white culture has over my school. Despite making some progress when it comes to discussing race in American history with white students, some concepts and assumptions aren’t able to avoid certain topics and narratives. Overall, my best intentions, my conversations at times served to uphold white supremacy structures through silence and exploitations.

Word Choice is Powerful
Explaination — substitution of a pleasant expression for unpleasant or offensive one. White people often employ different words to refer to subjects deemed offensive or unpleasant and use them when it comes to race and racism.
This is seen as a way to “get around” or avoid certain words, a way of speaking that doesn’t appear to be racist or offensive. However, replacements for race, racism, racial stereotypes, oppressions, and other words only serve white people. Rephrasing under race and racism makes it palatable, more comfortable, and less offensive only to white people. They serve to avoid direct conversations about systemic racism. The sentences remaining says, “If we don’t directly talk about it, it doesn’t exist.” That is white privilege.
One are not just words on a shelf which we can take out every once in a while, or never at all, in the classroom. They are implicit systems of oppression that affect real people every day.

Be Careful How, and Where, You Step
White dominant culture says that race can only be discussed in regards to specific topics and time periods. It tells us the systemic racism does not exist today; it is a thing of the past. Racism only refers to those people who held rigid and backward views. Teachers, especially white teachers in white schools, are told to be apolitical — and race is often perceived as a political issue.

When I shared with other teachers that I wanted to work toward creating new and developing anti-racist teaching practices, their response was, “Great! I hope you get to the content and Civil War soon.” In schools with white-centered curriculums, discussions about racism are only relevant within specific historical periods. 2020 is not even an approved historical period to teach about systemic racism. Taking about, even mention as “important periods or daily, and refer on instruction ground.

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... no one who is born into and raised in Western culture escapes being socialized to participate in racist relations. Anti-racist education seeks to interrupt these relations by educating people to identify, name, and challenge the norms, patterns, traditions, ideologies, structures, and institutions that keep racism in place.

— Sensoy and DiAngelo, Is Everyone Really Equal?

Handle with Care: Anti-Racist Teaching in a White School

This artist’s book is my attempt to represent abstractly — and yet name directly — the forces of white fragility and white normative structures surrounding race that I encountered within myself and other teachers while student teaching. In the winter and spring of 2019, I taught three 8th grade U.S. History classes at a local suburban middle school with a majority white student body (84%) and a nearly all-white faculty. In my time spent teaching at this school, I aspired to develop anti-racist teaching practices as a new teacher. While some of my efforts were fruitful for my students, what I discovered as a white teacher was that I was affected by the dominant white culture I was immersed in more than I wanted to admit. Through reflection on my teaching practice by analyzing one specific lesson I created to be anti-racist, my own silence and avoidance of race and racism became visible.

The various items in this box represent legitimate barriers I and all white teachers face as we strive to center race, unlearn racism, and develop anti-racist teaching practices in schools. The point of creating a project focused on the “Handle with Care” aspects of white schools is to identify and name forces of white dominance. By doing so, I and other white teachers will be better equipped in the future to reflect on our own white fragility and avoidance of race in order to challenge those white supremacist structures. This box represents my own reflections on common tactics of white fragility within myself and my school.

I hope that you find space and inspiration for reflection as you embark on this journey with me. The work only really begins when we use our reflection to make actual changes in our lives and the lives of our students.

References