

**I was Called “Aggressive” in a Classroom:
How Educator Preparation Programs Can Better Prepare
Students for Diversity**

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Abstract: The paper is an account of an Afro-Caribbean, female Ph.D. candidate being called Aggressive while teaching at a predominately White institution (PWI) in the Midwest. The recollection of the experience explores, through the eyes of a Black female scholar, the emotions of being called Aggressive on a PWI campus and highlights the work that remains in helping develop future educators who are not threatened by ethnic and cultural diversity in the classroom.

Keywords: teacher preparation, cultural diversity, racism, predominantly White institution (PWI), Black female scholar

Introduction

“I have a report from a student who says you responded to her aggressively in class.” The abruptness of that sentence from my teaching coordinator felt like a slap across my face. “Aggressively?” I repeated. I paused, trying to understand the words just said to me. I began blinking rapidly. I felt the tears slowly rise in my eyes and the bile in my stomach. I remembered the interaction that took place, the topic of which was special education law, policies, and effective classroom management for students with disabilities. The incident occurred on a predominantly White institution (PWI) campus, in a class taken mainly by junior preservice teachers. I replayed my actions in my head. A White female student asked me if she was to complete Question 1 or 2, and I remember looking down at my laptop when the student asked the question. I looked up, responded, “Question one, Question one,” and continued with class dismissal. My tone of voice was the tone I always used and in the Trinidadian accent that I have always had. It was my typical response.

In trying to help me make sense of the accusation, my supervisor forwarded the student’s email. The email stated I was walking around the class like a “madwoman,” gesturing with my hands in the air, speaking loudly, and I shouted the word “one” at her. She reported she felt “so humiliated,” and she could never ask another question in class again. Immediately, I accepted the blame; after all, I was the instructor and honestly did not intend to offend her. My mind began racing. I am passionate when speaking, which can sometimes translate into elevated voice levels, but was I aggressive? The meaning and implication of the word “aggressive” weighed heavily on my mind.

Using the word “aggressive” against a Black woman brings up “the angry Black woman” pejorative stereotype that is used to describe the Black female. As the “angry Black woman,” one is unduly aggressive and angry in communication with others (Walley-Jean, 2009). The Oxford dictionary defines aggressive as: “1)

Of or relating to aggression; involving attack; offensive. 2) Tending to dispose or attack others” (Oxford, n.d.)” By my response, my student felt I was attacking her or even angry with her, which was a false misrepresentation of what occurred. Unfortunately, Black women’s actions, responses, and demeanor in the workplace are often misinterpreted as aggressive, especially in academia (Gentry, 2021; Rabelo et al., 2021). In a study that examined how White people in the workplace perceive Black women, Rabelo et al. (2021) explain that this misinterpretation typically occurred through a “White gaze” (p. 1843) in which White people viewed a Black woman's general demeanor, calmness or even assertion as aggression. In this study, participants depicted the workplace experiences of several Black women labeled ‘aggressive’. One Black woman reported a complaint against her by a White man who said he felt threatened by her because she spoke with her hands (Rabelo et al., 2021). In a similar study, Motro et al. (2021) examined the effects of the "angry Black woman" stereotype in the workplace. They found Black women were more likely to have their expressions of anger viewed negatively by observers than expressions of anger made by their White colleagues (Motro et al., 2021). They were considered as even more hostile when they engaged in similar aggressive behavior as White people (Duncan, 1976). And now with this student’s accusation presently brought against me, I now became another Black professional woman deemed threatening in my work setting.

The word aggressive has severe and often deadly consequences when used against Black people. The term "aggressive” was used to describe countless unarmed Black men and women engaged in daily activities but were seemingly judged as a threat by law enforcement officers and killed by White police officers (Chaney & Robertson, 2015). In addition to law enforcement threats to unarmed Black men and women, Black people, especially Black women, face similar threatening situations in work environments such as academia. Young and Hines

(2018) state, “As evidenced with police shootings of unarmed Black women, we as Black female professors are often seen as ‘armed and dangerous,’ aggressive, or hostile to white students” (p.21). The perception of Black female professors as ‘aggressive’ is translated to the treatment Black women receive from non-Black students. Moreover, Black women frequently faced microaggressions from non-Blacks on college campuses that were tied to stereotypes such as aggression (Morales, 2014).

As I reflected on these facts, I questioned myself again, "Was I too aggressive, or was I misunderstood?" And then, slowly, at that moment, fear and shock descended on me as I finally understood the possible danger of teaching while Black in America.

Being a Black Faculty Member

Black faculty members account for 2% of full-time professors in the United States (Irwin et al., 2021), and the lack of cross-cultural exposure affects how White people who have not had previous interactions with Black people view them (Garda, 2011). As a Black, Trinidadian, cisgender female with an accent and an Afro, I am a walking billboard for cross-cultural exposure, intersectionality, and diversity and a prime target for misunderstandings by students who may not have been exposed to my race, culture, or history. I felt targeted and like another race-related statistic in the meeting with my teaching coordinator. However, more importantly, I realized that I was a teacher preparation educator who had much more work to do in helping prepare teachers to at least accept diversity at a bare minimum. Introspectively, I fear appearing “too Black” to White people, wondering if any of my cultural or racial characteristics can be viewed as a threat to my students at a predominantly White institution (PWI). I am not alone in this perspective, as Louis et al. (2016) also acknowledged feeling self-conscious when growing her dreadlocks in academia because she was fearful of appearing “too Black” (p. 458). This fear is reinforced by research showing that Black faculty

members at predominantly White institutions (PWI) are much more likely than other racial or ethnic groups to face aggression (Pittman, 2012; Louis et al., 2016; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020). For example, Black faculty members are at risk for higher levels of student disrespect, reports and concerns of their classroom instruction being made to department chairs and coordinators, and extremely poor teacher evaluations (McGowan, 2000; Stanley, 2006; Tuit et al., 2009, Pittman, 2012).

Educator Preparation Programs

More than 70% of preservice teachers enrolled in teacher education programs are White and have minimal exposure and experience with diverse individuals (Kayaalp, 2019; Sleeter 2017). Further, many White students entering these programs do so with very limited cognizance of the histories and cultures of the diverse populations living in the United States enrolled in their same programs (Skepple, 2015). Even when students enter educator preparation programs, their cultural diversity training becomes limited to classroom discussions, article critiques, and non-diverse field experiences (Skepple, 2015). Many have unaddressed biases their programs fail to address (Cooc, 2017). Unfortunately, their teacher preparation programs are also not adequately organized to teach them to understand a culture, view culture and differences as strengths, and appropriately teach students who are culturally and ethnically different (Barrio, 2020).

Akiba (2011) proposed addressing future educators' cultural incompetency by enhancing preparation to teach in diverse settings. This includes creating educator programs where (a) college classrooms that allow for collaborative learning where teachers and students can freely discuss questions and give feedback about sensitive topics and issues that many of them wanted to ask but feared asking about; (b) exposure to field experiences where they are exposed to students with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds; and (c) instructors model

culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) throughout their courses. Students exposed to these three characteristics within their teacher prep program reportedly had improved attitudes toward multiculturalism, gained more knowledge about racism and cultural diversity, and felt more confident in teaching diverse students (Akiba, 2011).

Turning a classroom into a learning community inside a teacher preparation program is a powerful way to help create culturally competent teachers. Costello and Stahl (1996) found that creating a learning community through feedback, emotional support, and mentorship for diverse first-year students in a teacher preparation program (TPP) resulted in community and support among participants and increased student retention and retention cumulative grade point averages. Moreover, students were asked to share personal narratives, apply them to the learning process, and engage in dialogue centered on institutional racism and its impact on oppressed groups, especially within the school system (Bryant & Zijdemans, 2015).

Assigning preservice teachers to field experiences in diverse classroom settings is a mandatory component of preparing teachers who feel culturally competent in instructing students of color. Bloom and Peters (2012) measured teachers' self-efficacy levels and their White Racial Identity (WRI). They found that teachers' self-efficacy decreased when placed in a room with Black students when they became more aware of their WRI. The more their awareness of white privilege and racial inequities increased, their teaching self-efficacy in using instructional strategies and classroom management for diverse students decreased. For some teachers, being placed in a diverse classroom within a field experience is the only opportunity to challenge unconscious biases and internalized misconceptions they may have developed about students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and cultures. White preservice teachers experienced cognitive dissonance when their preconceived beliefs about students from different racial

backgrounds were proven false after interacting and developing relationships with them (Eisenhardt et al., 2012). Moreover, White preservice teachers felt more comfortable discussing racism and institutional racism after a service-learning experience with diverse schools (Coffey, 2010).

Teacher preparation programs need instructors capable of teaching culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). There is a common complaint among teachers that while research shows CRP is imperative in successfully preparing preservice teachers to be culturally competent, there is confusion about how to apply CRP in the classroom (Griner & Stewart, 2013; Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017). The term CRP was first popularized by Ladson-Billings (1995) after she found there was no language of excellence associated with identifying Black students' academic achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2014). She developed CRP to be used as "a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). She acknowledged the necessity of CRP being used by teachers of diverse and marginalized students as it encouraged the development of their socio-political consciousness, making them aware and change agents of social inequities that are more likely to affect historically marginalized groups. Gay (2018) expanded the definition to define CRP as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them. Teaching to and through the strengths of ethnically diverse students" (p. 36).

CRP has been shown to have positive effects when applied to the classroom. Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students exposed to an integrated reading comprehension strategy through a CRP framework increased their mean scores for word recognition, reading comprehension, and story

retelling (Bui & Fagan, 2013). However, 0% of surveyed teacher preparation candidates reported being very familiar with the CRP teaching approach, 15% of students reported being unfamiliar with it, and 63% reported limited knowledge of CRP (Samuels et al., 2017). The lack of familiarity with CRP among preservice teachers creates knowledge gaps that lend themselves to misperceptions and biases towards ethnically diverse individuals.

Value in Diversity. With the enrollment of students in public schools becoming more ethnically and racially diverse by 2028 (Hussar & Bailey, 2020), a negative attitude and disregard for one's ethnicity and diversity have no place inside or outside the classroom. Educators must be educated and prepared to see diversity as a strength, and teacher preparation programs must be part of the answer. Teacher preparation programs are "one of the most important parameters that help teachers gain a culturally responsive pedagogical approach, and culturally responsive teaching should not be an extension of a teacher training program but rather a direct center" (Karatas & Oral, 2016, p.247). However, many programs dedicate only one or two diversity units in either introductory courses or final classes (Sleeter, 2017).

I desire for my students to see my diversity as valuable. When I am seen with my Afro and my accent is heard, there should be little to no fear or bias because non-Black students have been taught to understand the asset this difference in appearance may bring to their educational setting and their lives. They will value the knowledge and experience I bring after working in two educational systems in different parts of the world and the cultural and intellectual capital I add to their class, institution, and academic program.

The following list is a set of recommendations based on research, theory, and current practice to better improve the content and structure of Educator preparation programs that seek to prepare culturally competent and antiracist teachers unequivocally:

- 1) **Hire more scholars of color.** The clarion call to actively hire more scholars of color, especially in academia, is not new, but Black people continue to account for less than 3% of faculty within academia (Sensoy & Diangelo, 2017).
- 2) **Support faculty members of color.** Predominately white institutions must ensure that they provide immense support for faculty of color when they receive complaints and criticism, especially if they are the lone person of color in their department (Settles et al., 2021).
- 3) **Revamp educator preparation programs to center on diversity and social justice.** Cultural diversity should also be infused into every aspect of academic programs. It should include more antiracist pedagogy that can help challenge the narrative and center the perspectives of supposed Black aggression. Zeichner (2016) posits many students have heard of culturally responsive teaching and critical race theory but do not know how to use them or understand the importance of each. Students need a deep understanding to implement the essential features of antiracist pedagogy, which requires that they be fully integrated into teacher preparation programs.
- 4) **Intentionally place preservice teachers in diverse field placements.** By not being exposed to Black culture or any other culture that is foreign to us, it makes it more likely for someone to misinterpret tones, comments, or even the way one walks as a threat and something to fear (Neal et al., 2003; Blanchette, 2006; Tefera & Fischman, 2020). Teacher preparation programs and preservice teachers need field experiences that expose them to diverse ethnic groups to experience, understand, and hopefully, one day value the differences among cultural and ethnic groups. The literature is replete with examples of students who never had cross-cultural exposure and had biases; but when they were exposed to the culture, they changed their perceptions (del Prado et al., 2012)

5) **Integrate race-centered teacher education into educator programs.** Race-centered or race-conscious teacher education (Ullucci, 2010; Shah & Coles, 2020) is necessary and should be critical in educator preparation programs. Past research and reform have focused on confronting and changing preservice teachers' racial ideologies and attitudes through recognizing essential social justice concepts such as "privilege." However, race-centered teacher education will teach preservice teachers how to recognize "racial phenomena" (Shah & Coles, 2020) within the classroom and provide practical and realistic ways to deal with them. Additionally, a set of national competencies or agreed-upon best practices should be developed and presented to teacher preparation programs to help teachers create a racist-free educational environment for all children, regardless of denomination, ethnicity, citizenship, language, gender, and skin color.

These recommendations are not exhaustive and are aimed at helping educators understand the assets of culturally ethnic individuals and value the knowledge they bring to the classroom and any other setting.

Conclusion

The meeting with my coordinator ended well. As a mentor and a racially conscious woman, I believe that she did her best to console me and reassure me that she believed that I had not acted aggressively and that nothing more would become of the situation. However, I somehow still left feeling a little helpless, a little unsafe, and very much misunderstood as an international educator. Educator preparation programs can and should be the place to provide safe and structured learning environments and opportunities to address this critically important problem of preparing culturally competent, antiracist teachers, but reform is needed. Working towards a racist-free K-12 and especially college classrooms is the goal, and it will not be solved overnight. Racism cannot be cured instantly, but

it cannot be fixed by deciding to "not see race" or "not see color." I once heard someone ask, "if you can't see race, then how can you see racism?" I also ask if you graduate from a teaching program without seeing ethnicity or culture, especially as a strength and not as a disadvantage or a disability, then are you adequately prepared to be a teacher?

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