

don't say Nothing

SILENCE SPEAKS VOLUMES. OUR STUDENTS ARE LISTENING.

BY **JAMILAH PITTS** ILLUSTRATION BY **ALEX WILLIAMSON**

AS EDUCATORS we (sometimes unknowingly) step into roles of advocate, caretaker, guide, and even mother or father to students. Students pay attention to everything we say and do. They particularly pay attention to our silence.

We may be uncomfortable talking about race, but we can no longer afford to be silent. We have chosen a profession, which—like parenting—requires that our comforts come second to those of children.

Many black and brown students are educated in school systems and classrooms where they, despite making up the racial majority, are taught how to understand a world by a staff comprised of a powerful minority. When their teachers choose to remain silent about moments of racial tension or violence—violence that may well touch students' own communities or families—these children are overtly reminded of their inferior place in society.

Even as a black teacher, I have to set a tone for my students that signals that it's safe to talk about race. Even with me, students of color are afraid to say the word *white* or to name the blatant racism of slavery and Jim Crow. If that's the case, imagine how much more difficult it is for them to engage in dialogue about mass incarceration rates; the militarism of police; the killing of innocent black men and women; cycles of poverty; the destruction of our bodies, minds and souls; the lack of access to healthy food and quality schools; and gentrification. These are all symptoms of a type of racism that remains deadly to this day because, despite bodies lying in the street, we refuse to talk about it.

White teachers must also broach these topics with white children attending white schools. These students *need* to learn about the destructive power of racism and brutality that have plagued our country for centu-

Begin by confronting your own biases—about yourself, your students, your fellow educators, the world. This process is essential; if educators don't do this, think about how much damage we could do to the open, vulnerable minds of our students. In particular, examine your feelings about the police. And, regardless of your personal feelings about law enforcement, it is critical to understand that many black and brown students have incredibly negative perceptions about the police. This difficult understanding on the part of teachers can hopefully lead to dialogue and healing in schools.

Once you've done the inner work of evaluating your own comfort levels and examining your biases, start the conversation. You might begin by admitting to students that—like them—you are scared, frustrated, angry, confused, hurt or uncomfortable. Students at any age understand these feelings and will appreciate

*Teaching as an act of resistance
and teaching as an act of healing
are not mutually exclusive.*

ries. They should also understand that Alton Sterling, Philando Castile and Trayvon Martin were preceded in death by Emmett Till, Jimmie Lee Jackson and countless others whose stories and deaths we must also teach. Our lack of instruction becomes deadly when we allow fear and discomfort to indirectly allow white students to labor under false, privileged assumptions.

Moreover, the silence on the part of white teachers who teach black and brown children is insulting. Imagine seeing white people, the perceived dominant race, loving and appreciating black culture when it is pretty—enjoying the music, food, culture and beauty of our people—but remaining silent about our oppression and refusing to see how the beauty of our culture was largely born out of necessity. It hurts students when their teachers only acknowledge what black people have done *for* this country and not what this country has done *to* them.

But how encouraging is it to know that we stand in a powerful and political position where we can directly influence and break this silence?

your humility, compassion and vulnerability, especially black and brown students. This is how you lay the foundation.

Next, you might begin to explain why you are feeling this way, although many students will already know why. And then, after you begin the conversation, step back, sit down and be quiet. Let your students lead. Let them speak and ask questions. Allow them, for once, the opportunity to be “in front” of what they are feeling rather than reacting to it.

I like to use the practice of a silent dialogue. During this year's recent killings, I opened with a question and placed large chart paper on the floor on which I wrote questions and asked students to respond silently (with the exception of clarifying questions or making sure that students were up-to-date on current events). I allowed students to express themselves freely and respond to each other on the paper. This is a tactic that may be helpful if you are truly uncomfortable and don't know where to begin.

Some students wanted to discuss aloud, so we did. I jumped in only to guide or challenge statements that were not aiding the dialogue in a positive way, but I did this in a way that affirmed the students.

This is a beautiful practice. Students come into the classroom with ideas, hearts, passions, mindsets and understandings about their own humanity. They have been students of the news and their families' stories and experiences without you; they don't necessarily need you to understand certain aspects of the world. So if you feel that the conversation is too heavy or that the weight of having to end racism is in your lesson plan, humble yourself and relax. It isn't. Your students need you to allow them space, not to fix the world.

Literature teachers like myself have all the tools necessary to break the silence. Literature is about discussion, awareness and critical thinking. Writers

science was used to justify the myths that promoted black inferiority. This could be followed by a unit on the black scientists whose contributions have greatly advanced the field. Include the Tuskegee experiments and facts about Henrietta Lacks' death so that students understand that black bodies have too often been used, manipulated and destroyed.

Be on guard against false narratives about how all white people are bad or racists and all African Americans are saints or martyrs. We also cannot remain silent about incidents like the attacks on police in Dallas and Baton Rouge. Teach about the white people who marched with Dr. King and lift their voices in the Black Lives Matter movement today. Teach about white parents who cry out over the lives of slain black children as they would grieve for their own. This is essential if we are to allow our children, and our world, to heal.



throughout history have used their pens and pencils to challenge the very structures that still harm our students today. They have done the work for us. Choose a revolutionary book and *really* teach it. Create units around James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Michelle Alexander and Ta-Nehisi Coates, who, like Baldwin, forewarns all black sons of the dark hours that might soon overtake them.

History teachers, teach about what *actually* propelled and sustained the civil rights movement—how the boycotts hit white people in their pockets and black activists used the media to show the world the brutality of white supremacist police officers—as opposed to a simplified and erroneous account of a docile Rosa Parks who was simply too tired to give up her seat. Remind students that the outrage and outcry of Trayvon Martin's and Alton Sterling's families echo the cries of Emmett Till's mother whose screams exceeded grief, all of them revealing an acknowledgment that their loved ones had become martyrs.

Science teachers, have students research how

From left to right: Emmett Till, Jimmie Lee Jackson, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile

Teaching as an act of resistance and teaching as an act of healing are not mutually exclusive.

Finally, learn from and for your students. Hear their needs, listen to their struggles—and don't shy away just because you may not understand them. Immerse yourself in literature that matters and that sharpens your zeal for human rights, social justice and teaching. Connect yourself with others who are doing this work.

And when you don't have the words and can't plan the lessons, don't just say nothing; say exactly what you are feeling. That will mean more to your students than you may ever know. ♦

Pitts teaches high school English in Harlem, New York. She is also a graduate student at Teachers College of Columbia University.