

## Nice Is Not Enough: Defining Caring for Students of Color

Sonia Nieto

“But I’m a nice guy,” the young man sitting across from me said plaintively, attempting to explain why all the talk about racism in education in our class was so unsettling to him. He would soon begin his teaching career, no doubt in an urban school, and he believed that being “nice” would see him through the challenges of teaching young people with whom he had very little experience or connection until then.

This scene took place fifteen years ago, but it was not the first time, and it certainly would not be the last, that a student had come into my office to try to shed the guilt he was feeling about being white and to reaffirm his sense of being a nice person who was trying to help students of color. In my thirty years of teaching teachers and prospective teachers, this scene has been repeated countless times, sometimes accompanied by hand-wringing, sometimes by tears, often by frustration or remorse. Usually the feelings students describe are brought on by readings and discussions in my classes in multicultural education, which convey a message that is hard for some of them to hear: that, regardless of our individual personalities, we are all situated within a racially unequal structure that we often unwittingly perpetuate. When confronting stark realities they have never thought about, or have chosen not to see, many white students experience palpable pain and disconcerting disequilibrium. My greatest challenge as a teacher educator has been to help white students and students of color understand that racism is not simply a personal attitude or individual disposition and that feeling guilty or “being nice” are not enough to combat racism. Racism involves the systemic failure of people and institutions to care for students of color on an ongoing basis. Although most of my students who experience guilt and frustration about their role in an unequally caring structure are white, I include student teachers of color in my analysis. Being a person of color does not insulate us from biased perceptions and actions toward those whose backgrounds are unlike our own. Latinos may harbor biased views of African Americans, African Americans may have prejudiced views of Cambodians, and so on. People can even harbor biased views about their own group (see Venezuela, Chapter 10).

Caring within a structure plagued by inequality takes multiple forms, and at some moments when we think we are caring for students of color we actually are harming them because we are failing to counter a social structure that treats them unequally. Mary Ginley, a gifted white teacher, articulated this idea beautifully in a journal entry for one of my classes:

School is a foreign land to most kids (where else in the world would you spend time circling answers and filling in the blanks?), but the more distant a child’s culture and language are from the culture and language of school, the more at risk that child is. A warm, friendly, helpful teacher is nice but it isn’t enough. We have plenty of warm friendly teachers who tell the kids nicely to forget their Spanish and ask mommy and daddy to speak to them in English at home; who give them easier tasks so they won’t feel badly when the work becomes difficult; who never learn about what life is like at home or what they eat or what music they like or what stories they have been told or what their history is. Instead, we smile and give them a hug and tell them to eat our food and listen to our stories and dance to our music. We teach them to read with our words and

wonder why it's so hard for them. We ask them to sit quietly and tell them what's important and they must know to "get ready for the next grade." And we never ask them who they are and where they want to go.<sup>1</sup>

As this reflection makes clear, teachers can participate in practices of racism—that is, practices that deny students of color equal opportunities along racial lines—even when they think they are individually being "nice." In the examples Ginley provides, "nice" educators sometimes convey, even unwittingly, a deep disdain and disrespect for families by suggesting that home cultural values have no place in school. I have seen numerous cases in which "nice" teachers expected less of their students of color, believing that by refusing to place the same rigorous demands on their students of color as they do on white students, they were making accommodations for the students' difficult home life, poverty, or lack of English-language proficiency. Such "accommodations" may unintentionally give students the message that teachers believe these students are incapable of learning (see also Taylor, Chapter 17).

Even as we purport to care about all students equally, we also often tolerate policies in our districts and schools that harm students of color, especially those who are poor and those for whom English is a second language: unequal resources, punitive high-stakes testing, and rigid ability-group tracking are some key examples.<sup>2</sup> Racism in these forms involves failing to ensure that institutions care for students. The late Meyer Weinberg, a historian who studied school desegregation, defined racism as a system of privilege and penalty.<sup>3</sup> According to this definition, a student is rewarded or punished in education (as in housing, employment, health, and so on) by the simple fact of belonging to a particular racialized group, regardless of his or her individual merits or faults. Within such an unequal system, even "nice" people can accept and even distribute these unfair rewards and punishments. This idea is difficult, even wrenching for many people to accept.

I have utilized several strategies to get preservice teachers to consider and debate how, despite their best intentions, they might actually participate in various institutional practices of not caring for students. To ensure that their institutions *are* caring for students, educators can begin to ask one another, in so many words, what it *means* to "care" for their student body. Participants should make this discussion of caring safe, but not necessarily personally comfortable; participants will need to struggle with hard ideas about themselves and about institutions.

To help teachers explore particularly critically what sort of caring assists students of color struggling within unequal systems, I ask them to do an in-depth case study of a student (for guidelines, see Nieto and Bode 2008, Resource List). Looking carefully at an individual member of a group dispels stereotypes about the needs of all people from particular backgrounds, while at the same time gives teachers a more complete understanding of how group membership affects the contexts in which students live. I also have them read "coming of age" stories of young people of various backgrounds (see Nieto and Bode 2008) so that they understand the specific challenges of encountering racism and start thinking about what students of color might need from their teachers. These activities are followed by dialogue, reflection, and analysis designed to get teachers discussing how they and their students are members of structurally positioned groups. Teachers come to see that caring for students within unequal structures requires going beyond "niceness" to challenge institutional inequality.

I then ask teachers to think deeply about and debate what it means to demonstrate care in a classroom. Teachers may think of caring as unconditional praise, or as quickly incorporating cultural components into the curriculum, or even as lowering standards. On the contrary, others have argued, an

“ethic of care”<sup>4</sup> means a combination of respect, admiration, and rigorous standards. What is needed, as described by researcher Rosalie Rolón-Dow<sup>5</sup> is *critical care* that responds to students’ actual personal lives and to the institutional barriers they encounter as members of racialized groups. Teachers must understand individual students within their concrete sociopolitical contexts and devise specific pedagogical and curricular strategies to help them navigate those contexts successfully. This work begins when we ask what it means to “care.”

Source: Pollock, Mica. (2008). *Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real About Race in School*. New York: The New Press