can we talk?

When it comes to discussing race, it's clear that in classrooms around the country, including those at the Ed School, more work needs to be done.

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The incident came almost without warning. It was the third week of Professor Richard Elmore's Politics and Education course, and Elmore, Ed.D.'76, C.A.S.'72, was jumping headlong into one of the thorniest political issues in education — race. He'd assigned readings from autobiographies of men of color including Richard Wright and Richard Rodriguez, along with readings about racial identity.

The discussion started slowly, with students dancing around the issue with tepid responses. Halfway into the class, however, a white student named Deborah broke the niceties by questioning how much race really had to do with the men's experiences, which she said 'are a lot like my experiences growing up as a white working-class kid in a place where we were treated like trash.' Another white student, Alice, seconded her. "I don't think these issues are as racially based as they are made out to be," she said. "Social class counts a lot in how kids are treated in schools."

As Elmore, who is also white, settled in for a spirited discussion, he was instantly brought up short. "You have no understanding of the issues these people face," cut in a Latina woman named Helen. "You have chosen your identities. . . . People of color have no such privilege; we carry our identities wherever we go." Immediately, another Latina student named Jessica jumped in with even stronger words. "You don't understand. You can't possibly understand. You will never understand," she said. "This happens all the time in classes here. Issues of racism get pushed aside in favor of things white people like to talk about."

In the hour that followed, Elmore saw the group fabric of a once-promising class unravel. After the outburst, barely anyone said a word, and those that did made sure that their comments were uncontroversial. The two Latina students stayed after class to criticize the professor for not taking their side more explicitly. As for the white students, Alice dropped out of the class a few weeks later, and Deborah wrote a letter saying she would not participate in any future discussions about race. "In the space of a few moments, my whole life (at least my life as a teacher) passed before my eyes," Elmore later wrote in a case study exploring the incident, which happened five years ago. (Elmore changed only the names of the students.) "It felt very bad — bad like sick-in-the-pit-of-your-stomach bad; bad like I-want-outta-here bad."

Elmore isn't the first teacher in the world to be blindsided by issues of race. Few topics in the classroom engender such a volatile emotional response. For some students, race is tied up so closely with their identity, it's impossible to treat dispassionately. For others, race is a topic they've barely investigated, making them reluctant to talk about it at all. For still others, it touches a raw nerve of defensiveness about their own privilege, causing them to lash out and deny its validity.

Yet with the growing diversity of students in all classrooms at all levels, the undercurrent of racial issues crops up in schools more than ever — whether in choices of what to read in the curriculum, the persistent achievement gap between students of color and whites, or inadvertent, racially loaded comments dropped by teachers or other students. That reality makes it more important than ever for teachers to learn how to talk about race in the classroom in a way that is effective and also inclusive.

"It happened quite a while ago, and I've gone through a lot of change since then," says Elmore, who now uses the case in class as a way to talk about racial issues before they occur. "To some degree, the [Ed School] has also, at least in being able to surface issues like this. Whether we are more successful at dealing with them is another story."

The issue of how educators talk about race surfaced recently at the Ed School after the departure of popular professor and Harvard Civil Rights Project founder Gary Orfield to the University of California, Los Angeles. In response, a group of doctoral students wrote an open letter to Dean Kathleen McCartney imploring the school to hire more faculty members of color as well as faculty of all races who focus on social and racial justice.

"I think it stumbles as a school in talking about race successfully in classrooms," says Mandy Taylor, Ed.M.'07, a white doctoral student who helped draft the letter. "There is often a deficit model that is applied to students and families of color, and we imagine our job as educators is to fill those gaps."

Since the students delivered the letter, students says, the Ed School has been proactive in trying to raise the issue of race, holding an open forum this past spring to discuss the topic and establishing a student advisory committee for the faculty search committee in order to actively recruit teachers of color.

"We do have the interest of everyone involved in wanting these issues to be openly discussed," says Liliana Garces, Ed.M.'06, another doctoral student who helped draft the letter and is Latina. "We don't just have the training on how to do that."

Lecturer Pamela Mason, M.A.T.'70, Ed.D.'75, former co-chair of the International Reading Association's Urban Diversity Initiatives Commission, says that's often because students at the Ed School are confronting race for the first time. "It's difficult sometimes because European American students don't see race as an issue because it hasn't been an issue for them personally," says Mason, who is African American. "When you as the other explain the world doesn't work that way for everyone, you are pushing people out of their comfort zone."

In a 1992 article in the Harvard Educational Review, Beverly Daniel Tatum, then a professor at Mount Holyoke College, now president of Spelman College, describes three sources of resistance to talking about race — a tendency to see race as a taboo topic; a socialized belief that the United States is a just society
where racial disparity doesn't exist; and a denial, especially among white students, that they are personally prejudiced, even as they recognize racism in others. In overcoming these sources of resistance, white students and black students go through parallel but different journeys to discover their racial identity. Students of color, for example, often go from a discovery phase where they feel anger about being treated differently into an immersion phase where they embrace their race and reject any symbol of “whiteness.” White students, meanwhile, often proceed from confrontation into a disintegration phase where they feel guilt and shame about their privileged status.

According to Tatum, these stages are rarely linear, but exist in a spiral where we are constantly revisiting previous stages. With so many students at so many different places in the same classroom, however, any dialogue becomes fraught with emotions of anger, fear, and denial. Add to that the fact that race isn't simply a black/white subject, but one with a tremendous variety of ancestry, language, and culture, and it's no wonder that many teachers and students simply ignore the issue.

"Teachers in the classroom with the best of intentions will often say that they see children, not race," says Mason, "but it really does a disservice to the children in terms of the rich cultural traditions that grace our classroom."

It can also do damage to those children's educational opportunities, says Associate Professor John Diamond, who has studied the racial achievement gap. "A color-blind discourse, which suggests we should not talk about color, has been used to undermine efforts to create more equity," says Diamond, who is African American. "To ignore race can lead us to overlook its significance and help to perpetuate inequality."

Associate Professor Mica Pollock details that phenomenon in her book *Colarmate*, which is about the problems that developed at a school in California in which racial issues bubbled under the surface but were rarely discussed.

"A lot of the reason that people don't talk about race is vulnerability, a fear of offending people or betraying lack of knowledge," says Pollock, who is white. Pollock's new book, *Everyday Antiracism*, seeks to solve this conundrum by giving teachers tools to actively combat racism in the classroom — not by ignoring its relevance, but by deciding when to look at a situation through a racial lens and when not to.

The book is full of essays written by Harvard faculty members and other scholars looking at various issues of race in education. The key, she says, is a "spirit of inquiry," both with students and with one's own concept of racial identity. Pollock conceives of a simple number line with "more opportunity" at one end and "less opportunity" at the other end; the teacher's job is to determine when a given action leads to more opportunity for the students. This past semester, Pollock taught a required module for master's students in the Teacher Education Program (TEP) in which she used the essays to investigate issues of race in their classrooms.

"A lot of times, especially when we are talking about huge systemic problems like the achievement gap and the intersection of race and poverty, people get overwhelmed and fail to see that there are things they can do every day to deal with these problems," says Pollock. Throughout the class, Pollock differentiated between guiding principles of antiracist work, specific strategies that teachers could employ in any classroom, and "do-tomorrows" that dealt with a specific issue brought up in the TEP class.

One principle the class developed after reading an essay by Dorinda Carter, Ed.M.'01, Ed.D.'05, for example, had to do with the issue of "spotlighting" students by unfairly making them speak for their race during racially charged discussions. Instead, students came up with the principle that no one speaks for their racial group, but they can speak as a member of a racial group.

That principle set off a light bulb for Amanda Blaine, Ed.M.'07, a white student who taught at English High School, a predominantly black and Latino high school in the Boston neighborhood of Jamaica Plain. Earlier in the semester, her class had been discussing *The House on Mango Street*, a book about Mexican immigrants, when African American students

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in the class began grilling a Latina student about Spanish phrases in the book, even though she was Puerto Rican. The conversation was respectful, says Blaine, but she felt like she lost control of the class.

"I was no longer moderating it," she says, "and I was lucky it hadn't turned awry and someone got offended."

Talking about race in the classroom is just as much about when not to talk about race as when to raise the topic. In another incident in Blaine's class, she was starting an independent reading project and was met with resistance from students who said they weren't "readers." Blaine wondered if that self-identification had something to do with reading being seen as "too white." Rather than raising the issue directly, however, Blaine let students lead the discussion by asking what makes a good reader. Her students raised many points, saying a reader was "nerdy," "not cool," or "someone who sleeps with a book under his pillow" — but never even brought up race.

"By asking open-ended questions like what is a good reader instead of do you have to be white to be a good reader, I was able to better teach," she says. "My thinking before was that race was important, it's always influencing what's happening. But the class made me think about what is my goal here — it's to create greater opportunity. Having a way of evaluating that was very important."

Racial issues don't only happen between different races. Monica Groves, Ed.M'07, who is African American, taught in an African American middle school in Atlanta. "Oftentimes people see only similarities there, so they don't think antiracist work is relevant, which is so far from the truth," she says.

Groves found inspiration in another concept developed in Pollock's class — the importance of "mirrors" for students to see their own experiences reflected, as well as to have "windows" into the experiences of others. That caused Groves, who returned to the same school this fall after graduation, to reevaluate the books she used in her sixth-grade class, which were almost all "mirrors" of racially diverse characters confronting issues of civil rights.

"What assumptions are you making when you put up a black role model and automatically assume this is someone they can automatically relate to?" she says. Instead, she resolved to use her resources to diversify her curriculum, adding literature dealing with other themes and other races to broaden the discussion. "The absence of Middle Eastern and Arab voices in my curriculum really struck me," she says. "That is definitely a voice we are going to incorporate this year.

As director of training and teacher development for Baltimore's teaching residency program, Tasha Franklin, Ed.M.'95, a member of the Ed School's alumni council, often sees teachers overcompensate by introducing only material dealing with the student's particular race into class.

"The conversations about race that occur are inclusive, but superficially inclusive," says Franklin, who is black. "Either they are just highlighting the usual suspects or the curriculum is a snapshot of cultural celebrations, and there are many missed opportunities to prepare students. How does this help them identify with a 10-year-old girl in Delhi, India?"

Mirroring a trend in urban education nationally, Franklin has seen the student body in Baltimore become increasingly composed of students of color, often from poor backgrounds, while the teaching force is increasingly white women from middle class or rural backgrounds. Oftentimes she sees racial sensitivity among white teachers manifest itself in increased leniency for underperforming students of color.

"The tendency is to feel sympathy for these poor black and brown children," Franklin says. "Part of that sympathy fosters this culture of excuses."

No matter how well-intentioned, says Franklin, that only leads to subtle discrimination by holding students of color to a lower standard. "I help my teachers develop something I call 'consideration without pity.' You can help them navigate their circumstances but also hold them accountable."

That was the path taken by Lecturer Katherine Boles, Ed.D.'91, in her classroom in upscale Brookline, Mass., where she taught for 25 years. While her students were predominantly white, the class also had several students of color, some bussed in from Boston.

"I was not pushing those children," she says. "We wouldn't expect them to do their work, and we'd let them get away with
that. That's racism, and I admit it. In a kind of pathetic liberal white way, I was racist."

With the help of another teacher, Vivian Troen, Boles began placing higher demands on them, running a homework club after school, collaborating with college interns to give them more attention in class, and setting up reports for parents to hold them accountable. Her efforts paid off when that class of fourth-graders all passed the MCAS standardized achievement test.

"But it wasn't easy," she cautions. "The kids are going to whine and cry and say they can't do it, and sometimes the parents say, 'Why are you working my child so hard?' It helps to have relationships with other teachers and parents outside the building. You can't do it alone."

Even positive stereotypes can lead to inadvertent racism and hurt student performance. Asians, for example, are sometimes perceived as the "model minority," says Chinese American Assistant Professor Vivian Louie, whose work looks at the experiences of Latin and Asian immigrants.

"Even though it's a very diverse group ethnically, they get classified as students who don't have needs. If they don't speak up, teachers assume that they must be getting the material, but it could be because they aren't getting it, or they are having problems at home." The key, she says, is to be aware of the "cultural shorthand" through which we categorize students.

"It's important to have some knowledge of where your students are coming from first as individuals. This cultural shorthand exists, but given that it exists, how can we expand upon it and give ourselves better tools to work with?"

Part of overcoming the difficulty of talking about race may be simply admitting that talking about race is difficult. After his experience with the flare-up in his politics class, Elmore began addressing the issue of race in all of his classes, often using the case study he wrote as a way of engendering discussion.

"Putting up cases like this releases the pressure on students," says Elmore. "It gets the issue out on the table right away and authorizes people to talk about it."

Which is not to say that being upfront about racial issues solves all of the problems. While Elmore has had a lot of success over the years with his new strategy, he recently had another flare-up in class where an Eastern European student made cultural assumptions about an African American classmate, who lashed back at him.

"A number of people in the class felt like this guy was totally silenced," says Elmore. "But it's very tricky in a situation like this. If you, as a professor, intervene and make it better, you are letting the group off the hook. My responsibility is to create a holding environment in which it is possible for that conversation to occur in some form and not have destructive consequences for individuals."

In a way, that could be seen as an analogy for the Ed School as a whole, which can serve as a safe place for students to navigate issues of race, so they will be better prepared when such issues come up in the classroom.

"That's the goal," says Dean Kathleen McCartney, "but based on my conversations with students, it's clear we have more work to do." This work must be done both in the classroom and in the wider campus community, say professors.

"We need to create an environment in which issues of race are discussed more broadly," says Diamond. "These conversations need to be facilitated so that the inevitable tensions and conflicts that arise do not undermine the substance of the discussions, but are used as learning opportunities."

In an effort to facilitate campus dialogue, Pollock will be opening up the TEP module this year to any student who wants to take it, as well as opening the door to some of her classes on racial issues to the wider community.

"These things are discussed without sufficient time throughout our field. Students come to the Ed School and say, 'Can I have a thorough conversation now?'" says Pollock. "If they can't have it here, then where else are they going to have time for it?"

— Michael Blanding is an award-winning magazine writer whose work has appeared in The Nation, The New Republic, Boston Magazine, The Boston Globe, and other publications.