

# Teacher Stories

Everyone Has One. What's Yours?

## Teacher Story Podcast Episode

### Interviewees:

Que'Aire Anderson

Deion Perkins

Jennifer Jacobs

Raymok Ketema

### Interviewer:

Ken Futernick, Founder, Teacher Stories

Recorded on August 26, 2020

© Copyright, 2020

Audio Recording Available on:

[www.teacherstories.org/podcasts](http://www.teacherstories.org/podcasts)

[Apple Podcasts \(Teacher Stories\)](#)

### **Ken:**

Hello, everyone. Welcome to Teacher Stories. This is your host, Ken Futernick. Today's podcast episode will be a little different. Normally I have just one or two guests. But today, I have four guests, all Black students who attend UC Santa Barbara, who you will meet shortly. The other more significant difference is that we won't be exclusively focused, as we usually are, on inspiring stories about teachers, but rather on the experiences these Black individuals have had as students as far back as they can remember, up to the present of students at UC Santa Barbara.

Let me say just a little bit about the context for this conversation. This is August 2020, the unprecedented crisis, at least in our lifetime, that we are all dealing with right now is the COVID-19 pandemic, which so far has led to over 175,000 deaths in the US. At the same time, we are witnessing another phenomenon, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, which was ignited by the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other Black individuals by police officers. What this movement is shining a harsh light on is the depth of structural racism that exists in America today. This issue and what to do about it has become a central topic of debate in the current presidential race between Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

Before we get started with our guests, I want to share a few facts about structural racism in education. We'll see what our guests have to say about these facts a little bit later. First, schools with high concentrations of students of color are about four times more likely to have uncertified teachers than schools with low concentrations [[view report](#)]. This includes people without full credentials, people teaching subjects like math and English, science and social studies with little background in these areas. Why does this happen? Because many schools with lots of students of color cannot attract and keep enough qualified teachers. Well, why is that? Because the persistent shortage is caused primarily by low pay and poor teaching conditions. That's structural racism, and the impact on students is profound.

Here's another fact. About 54% of all K-12 students in the US are students of color [[report](#)]. On the other hand, 80% of their teachers are white. While 15% of students nationwide are Black, just 7%, less than half of their teachers are Black [[report](#)]. Black male teachers are particularly rare. This is also a form of structural racism

because recent research shows that for students of color, the race and ethnicity of their teachers can be life altering. [A 2018 study](#) found that Black students who had a single Black teacher were 13% more likely to enroll in college. With two Black teachers, that number jumped to 32%. For Black boys, the impact is even more powerful. Having a Black teacher cut high school dropout rates by 39% for Black boys from low income families, the study found. So that's just a little background for our interview today. Let's meet our guests, put the data side and hear what their experiences were like. Que'Aire, let's begin you. Tell us who you are, what you're studying and where you grew up and went to school.

**Que'Aire:**

Okay. Hi, I'm Que'Aire Anderson. I'm a senior at UCSB. I'm an English major and Applied Psychology minor. I currently work with the Center of Black Cities Research under Dr. Tettegah. I'm from Oakland, California. You can say I'm a product of the Oakland Unified School District.

**Ken:**

Thanks so much, Que'Aire, for introducing yourself to our Teacher Stories audience. Deion, tell us about you.

**Deion:**

Yea. Hello, my name is Deion Perkins. I'm a double major at UCSB, a double major in Communications and Black Studies. I also work in the Center for Black Studies Research. I grew up in Delano, California and that's where I also went to school.

**Ken:**

Great. You like the rest of them are all studying remotely, right, or taking your courses. I don't know if you're actually taking courses this summer, but I know some of you are.

**Deion:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Ken:**

When you return in the fall, it's all going to be online. Is that right, Deion?

**Deion:**

Yep.

**Ken:**

Great. Raymok, tell us about you.

**Raymok:**

Hi, everyone. My name is Raymok Ketema. I am a third year PhD student in the Department of History at UC Santa Barbara. I'm from Berkeley, California. But my parents immigrated here from a small country in East Africa called Eritrea. Yeah, I went to all Berkeley schools growing up, so yeah. I think that's all.

**Ken:**

Great. Welcome, and thanks for being part of this. Jennifer, tell us about yourself.

**Jenn:**

Hey all. My name is Jennifer Jacobs. I do prefer to go by Jenn. I'm currently going into my fourth year at UCSB. Right now, I'm a double major in Black Studies and Sociology. I'm from Riverside, California, more specifically from Jurupa Valley because that's where I went to school in their Unified School District. Yeah, and I also do work in the Center for Black Studies Research right now, for two years, so it's my second year in there. So, I'm excited for that.

**Ken:**

Great. Thanks, Jenn, for telling us a little bit about yourself. We'll come back to you in a minute and hear more about your experience being a student. Que'Aire, let's go back to you. I would love for you to tell us a little bit about your experience being a student in schools and what that experience was like, particularly from a perspective of a Black student.

**Que'Aire:**

Yeah, so I started off at Brookfield Elementary, and then I went to James Madison Middle School, which turned into a high school. So I was actually the first graduating class of Madison Park Academy K-12. Then after high school, I'm at UCSB. Yeah, so at Brookfield, I believe I had my first Black teacher in kindergarten. This is when the community was heavily Black. It was like heavily Black and Hispanic. But there was a very high turnout rate of Black teachers at my elementary school.

So, I believe I had a Black teacher for every grade in elementary, yeah. And then in high school, is when I experienced getting more white teachers. A lot of them were first year out of Teach for America. They were just trying to get their feet wet in teaching. A lot of them weren't from that community. Those who did teach in [INAUDIBLE] which is where I went to school in Oakland, a lot of them were commuting from San Francisco or even commuting, I want to say from, I want to say a few from Manteca. But yeah, so I had my first Black teachers in elementary school. Then going into high school is when I experienced more of first year white teachers.

**Ken:**

Thinking back on your early experiences when you had lots of Black teachers, and then in high school when you didn't. Did it make a difference to you? Was it important to have had a lot of teachers early in your school experience?

**Que'Aire:**

Yes, I will say it definitely made a difference. Just because of the teacher's style, their approach to teaching the students in the classroom. For example, in 10th grade at Madison Park Academy, I had a few teachers who I think, well, I know they were uncomfortable in the community. So even then being uncomfortable in driving into the community where my school is located, you can see it in the way that they taught us.

They were very quick to go to disciplinary action versus, "Let me pull you aside. Let me communicate with you, let me talk to you." It was immediately, "Okay, like, go to the principal's office, or I want you out of my classroom." Again, just their teaching styles, none of it was really catered to the Black and brown community that it was in. Texts weren't revised to fit who they were teaching. It was just like, here is the academia. This is a lesson plan. Let me not even try to modify it for you. It was just like, "Here you go," if that makes sense. But yeah, a lot of the teachers, they kind of just came into this community and needed that year of experience. So yeah, I've dealt with a lot of that.

**Ken:**

Did you get the sense that they were there ... You just alluded to this, that they might not have been there by their own choosing. It was something that they had to do and were just trying to get through it rather than embracing the opportunity to teach in your school and to learn.

**Que'Aire:**

Yeah, yeah, I think a lot of the teachers who came in were forced. Our school was new, our school needed teachers, so they threw them there. That's not to say that as they spent their time there, they didn't create bonds with the students. But coming in, it wasn't their choice, "Let me go teach in [INAUDIBLE]." It wasn't their choice to go there. They kind of ended up there. Some left after that; they taught a year and left or because they did, they were able to bond with the community eventually, and see that a lot of Black magic is in that community. So yeah, a lot of them came in by force if I had to say.

**Ken:**

Can you remember a teacher you had in high school or one in elementary or middle school who was particularly important and had a positive, really positive influence on your life?

**Que'Aire:**

Yes. So her name is Miss Kattala. She used to teach at Castlemont High, which is also in Oakland. She later came to my high school, Madison. She was very instrumental in the application process. One thing in specific, when I was writing my personal statement, it was like, I don't really want to share all my personal things with people. Why I got to write about it? Just having a teacher be there, reading my personal story, not judging me, helping me articulate my experiences. She was there throughout that whole process.

Fun fact about her. She actually helped my older brother get into college, and he just graduated in 2018 from Weaver State. Then she helped me get into UC Santa Barbara, and helped my younger sister get into UC Merced. So she's literally helped three siblings from the same family get into college. But yeah, that's Miss Kattala. I think she's still in Oakland, still teaching at Madison as of right now as well.

**Ken:**

Ever had a chance to go back and tell her what difference she made in your life?

**Que'Aire:**

Oh, we still talk, not as much as I would like. But every now and then, she'll shoot me a paragraph of words of encouragement. But I know when I go to Oakland next...it's COVID...but I'll try to take her out to tea and stuff like that. But yeah, she's still around. She's still dope, still hitting me up.

**Ken:**

Any comments or questions from the rest of you about Que'Aire's story?

**Deion:**

Yeah, I was curious, Que'Aire, you're saying how your high school had an influx of new teachers, and that they were quick to jump to discipline. I was wondering being at a school that has a large Black population, were police officers a large part of that discipline or how did that discipline unfold?

**Que'Aire:**

Yes, so we had about two active campus police. Then we had a restorative justice coach. Some of our sports coaches doubled as disciplinary people, if that makes sense. Ironically, the campus police we did have were Black. So, I feel like in a way, they tried to have the Black campus police there to kind of like soothe the community because we matched as far as complexion. But they were there for one reason only and that was to keep people in check or to produce fear. You walk into your campus, it's 8:00 AM, you just woke up. But you see an officer, not necessarily antagonizing you, but checking your backpack.

**Deion:**

It's intimidating. Yeah.

**Que'Aire:**

Yeah, yeah, exactly.

**Jenn:**

Ready to antagonize, if they needed to.

**Que'Aire:**

Exactly, yes. Upon arrival, they used to check our backpacks. For a minute, they were even doing random searches. You're on government property, so they can do it. But yeah, to answer your question.

**Deion:**

Gotcha.

**Ken:**

Yeah, I wonder if others have just recollections about police presence on campuses and what kind of tone that's set, and whether you have any thoughts about how educators might organize schools now, and whether police are really necessary, and whether they serve a useful purpose or whether there might be a better way educationally to staff a school.

**Deion:**

I was just going to say firstly that I also had police in my high school at least do random searches. It never happened to my classes, but it would be three or four police who would come on campus with a dog. I'll see them just through my classroom door, I'll see them pull out a whole nother classroom. It, to me just, seemed like out of the blue and that they would just like check everyone's backpacks. It was just weird. I didn't I didn't know what was going on. But to answer your question, I think the police are absolutely not a needed part in school.

Like to me, school are supposed to be places of learning. All law enforcement does is just intimidate and antagonize. Instead of thinking like, "Oh, this assignment I'm about to turn in," I'm thinking, "Am I looking suspicious to this cop?" Especially being Black or is he going to want to see my backpack? I think moving forward, especially in an attempt to dismantle structural racism, police just need to be out of schools. We started to see some of that happen already in Minneapolis, I believe.

**Ken:**

Any other comments about Que'Aire's story or about the idea of police on campus?

**Jenn:**

I was just going to say I just think that children don't need to be policed. I mean, there are schools in inner cities where kids are policed from like elementary school and have their backpacks, you go to ... What is it? The metal detector. I don't understand how you think that is necessary or instead of providing kids with the resources they need, like the actual resources, like maybe counseling in school, an improvement in counseling, instead of having police on campus. That's just all I have to say about that.

**Raymok:**

Yeah. I just want to second what Jenn said, right? There should never be a place for policing on a campus for learning and especially considering that there is no way to ensure that police do not impose their implicit biases on particular students, right? The school-to-prison pipeline is a very real thing, and it impacts Black students the most. Just to also piggyback off of what Jenn said, I do believe, I think there's been within the last decade, a huge increase of violence on school campuses, right? Which has served a justification for having police on campus.

I think that while the school violence that's been occurring is incredibly frightening, it's a symptom of something larger happening in society that needs to be addressed and not policed. So I just wanted to put that out there, that we could be using our resources in probably more effective ways to ensure that we aren't producing students that want to go shoot up other students. Right? So yeah, I just wanted to add that in there that there always seems to be.

**Ken:**

What is that other thing out in society that may be contributing to the violence that you see on school campuses?

**Raymok:**

I'm going to use all the big -isms. So obviously, racism, particularly anti-Blackness because that is what we are talking about today. Capitalism, right? So income inequality, the patriarchy. The patriarchy is a huge part of why we have seen so many school shootings, right, at UCSB, I was here when the shooting happened back in 2014. Right?

That was a huge I think wake up call for UC Santa Barbara's community, right, that the culture that was being perpetuated on campus was very misogynistic, right? It encouraged in some ways, violence against women. So, there I think these really big, broad picture themes and ideas that heavily contribute to the ways in which our education system is deeply, deeply flawed.

**Ken:**

Yeah. Thanks for that, Raymok.

**Que'Aire:**

So, to just add on to that really, really fast. I know for me, it's specifically geographical location too because of where I'm at, a lot of the students that were going to the school, they're gang-surrounded. They don't have access to the proper ... It was only like one grocery store in the community. There was all these other environmental factors. Plus there's laws where it's like if I live in this community, and this is my zip code, I can't even try to get a better opportunity by going to another school. So just wanted to say that as well.

**Ken:**

That was Que'Aire who was speaking. I'll just ask all of you that when you jump in, some of you have done, just let listeners know who you are. Just say this is Que'Aire, in case they don't recognize your voice. I think Deion, yours is more recognizable. You're the one male. I think we're going to turn to you, and have you share your experience as a student.

**Deion:**

Like Que'Aire or unlike Que'Aire, I actually didn't have any Black teachers from kindergarten to high school. I think that definitely presents its own, like unique challenges. I was in a community in a school that was predominantly Hispanic. So the staff was also Hispanic. I can't really say I've ever feel like I experienced racism from the staff or the community. But like I said, being the only Black student in class most likely it did like present its challenges.

I felt like it was pretty just annoying. Whenever you're talking about Black-related topics in class, all the students suddenly look at you. I don't know why, they want to see your reactions or whatnot. Then it's almost like demanding I think when students are the only Black students in class because I think then students turn to you and think that you're this Encyclopedia of Black knowledge. That's happened to me a lot, like students would be like, "Oh hey. What did you think about this?" Or I've had a lot of students come to me like, "Can I call you Black," and stuff? "Should I use African-American?" It's just like a lot of like, people coming to you thinking that you know everything as just a student, right, learning about stuff. Yeah, that was my high school experience or kindergarten through 12th grade.

**Ken:**

When you heard me cite the statistic and I don't know if you've heard this before, but having a Black teacher cut the high school dropout rates by 39% for Black boys from low income families. Do you have any insights into why that may be true?

**Deion:**

Yeah. Yeah, I don't think it's that complicated. I mean, teachers are role models to the community in which they're in. I think if you have Black students who see role models who are also Black, they are motivated to go out and strive for greatness. Right? I think you also have ... I think Black teachers are probably more equipped to handle the unique issues of being a Black student than non-Black staffer. So, I think it's no surprise that having a Black teacher will cut the dropout rate.

**Ken:**

One other question for you, Deion. Tell us about a teacher, if one comes to mind, that made a difference in your life. Someone who had a positive impact.

**Deion:**

So, I'll probably say it was a professor or a handful of professors I met in college. I've had great, great, great teachers throughout the past. But I felt like I had developed a real, like the first relationship I developed outside of a classroom with an educator was a Black professor, it was Dr. [INAUDIBLE] and Dr. Banks. They convinced me or persuaded me to join the Black Studies Department. I just feel like they have been not only great role models, but they like inspire me to do my best work. I feel like they genuinely care what happens to me outside of the classroom. I also feel like I can go to them to certainly issues pertaining to race. I feel more comfortable in going to them.

**Ken:**

Yeah, great. Well, thank you for that. Raymok, let's go to you and share some of your story with our listeners.

**Raymok:**

So, I feel like I've been in school for so, so long.

**Ken:**

Yes. A PhD student, you have spent a long time in school. Do you have much more to go by the way before you get your PhD program completed?

**Raymok:**

Well, I just finished up my coursework. So I am preparing to take exams this upcoming school year. Then I will be able to embark on the dissertation writing journey. So I am halfway at least, which is good, because I love school, but I'm ready and ready to move on to the next stages of my life. But yeah, so I am skipping a hop away from where Que'Aire is from. I'm from Berkeley, California. I went to Berkeley schools my entire life.

I feel like Berkeley's reputation that I've heard it have is generally pretty accurate known as being this very multicultural, diverse, social justice-oriented type of space. Yeah, I think my high school was I think a bit less diverse. No, my elementary school was a bit less diverse than some of the other elementary schools in Berkeley because I lived in a bit of a whiter area of Berkeley. It was diverse still, but it was more predominantly white than South Berkeley, which was considered a more Black side of town.

So, I was often the only Black student in a lot of my classes in elementary school. I did have two Black teachers, one in the first grade and one in the fifth grade. Miss [INAUDIBLE] and Ms. [INAUDIBLE], I still remember them. They were lovely. I didn't have ... I can't really recall experiences directly from elementary school that at the time, I recognized that things were happening because of my race. I think a lot of things have dawned on me with age. Just a few years ago, I was randomly thinking about how every Thursday in elementary school, we had assembly day. That just meant the first half of the school day we would go to sit in an assembly and sing songs and be together as a school.

During February, Black History Month, we always had to sing these, like Black history themed songs. There's one song in particular that just randomly popped into my head a few years ago, because I mean five, six years

of your formative life, these things kind of end up just sticking in your head somehow. As I was singing the song, I realized that the song was so so problematic. It was a song written by a white woman who dreams that she is a slave and Harriet Tubman comes and saves her. That is what the whole song is about.

At the time, I had no idea what I was singing, I was just like, "Oh, this has a cool tune. Let me just sing along," whatever. But as I've gotten older, I've been able to reflect on things and be like, "Oh, wow. That was not okay." So, in kindergarten, I was the only Black girl in my class, therefore, I had to play Rosa Parks in the school play, right?

So, things like that, that at the time, I didn't realize what was kind of being insinuated or how my race was placing me in certain situations. But upon reflection now, I'm able to more clearly see that duh, I was the Black girl, so I had to be Rosa Parks. So, yeah, I think I became a lot more aware of my Blackness in middle school because I went to a middle school that had a significantly larger Black student population. Yeah, I became both hyper aware of my Blackness and my African-ness.

I think most people know that middle school, those years are some of the toughest years of trying to figure out who you are, just lots of bullies, and people are mean and horrible, and things like that. Right? So yeah, middle school was I would say, a kind of tricky time for me but I think it was the years in which I became very solid in my Blackness. I knew that who I was and who I wanted to identify as because I think middle school is a time where people are trying to force you into categories, into particular boxes, and you have to navigate that and choose for yourself what works for you and what doesn't, right? So I got the high school. I went to Berkeley High School. It's a huge high school, it had about 3500 students. It was a very diverse high school.

It's the only high school in the nation that had an African American Studies Department. So I would say high school radicalized me. Middle school introduced me to my Blackness. High school radicalized me. In the 10th grade, I took a class with a Black teacher, a Black man. His name was Mr. G. We used to call him Mr. G, Mr. Griffith, and he was a young teacher. You could tell he was not too many years out of college, he had a lot of energy. I took a class called Black psychology for the first semester. The second half was Black male and female relationships.

That class blew my mind and introduced me to such important historical concepts, ideas about race, even made me question how the school I was going to was structured, right? Very, I think, important information for me to have been introduced to at a younger age. Because of that, I would say I got pretty socially justice oriented. I became BSU president, ASB president. I got super involved in things and started organizing a lot. Yeah, I would say that that class had a profound impact on me as a Black student, to have had that opportunity. I think it would serve many Black students if the classes that we are taught even starting in elementary school introduced us to these very relevant ideas to our own life circumstances. Yeah, I came to college. I struggled for a long time trying to figure out what I wanted to study. I felt like UCSB was so white, coming from the Bay Area. Very white, very hard to adjust to culturally, educationally.

It took me a very long time to find majors that I felt okay trying to navigate. I ended up becoming a philosophy major, which was super white and I didn't like that much. So I balanced it out with a Black Studies Major to try and get the culture I felt like I needed. I did an Education Minor. Then I moved on in pursuing my master's at Ohio State. Now, somehow circled back. I will say somehow, actually, a very important professor in my undergraduate career really influenced a lot of the decisions I ended up making within my larger career trajectory. He's now my advisor in my PhD. program. So he was a African professor who taught an African history course, which was something I was desperately I think, needing at the time as I was really trying to connect with my own identity and my own history. So yeah, I feel very fortunate to have stumbled across it when I did. It was my last semester of college. I'm back getting a PhD in history, in large part, credit to him.

**Ken:**

Raymok, thanks for taking us through that journey of your school experience. One question I have, others may have questions for you as well. But did you ever in your school experience feel that you were treated differently because you were Black by teachers, by staff, by school leaders, by other kids? Did you ever feel that the expectations for you were different?

**Raymok:**

That's a good question. I think being a first generation student, school was something that was taken very, very seriously in my household, which meant that I was always a very good student. I generally had good relationships with my teachers. So I would say that if anything, because I already had such high expectations at home, it made it so that my teachers almost couldn't, I don't want to say they couldn't impose their own probably own biases against Black students on me, because I was proving to them that I could do the work.

But it's true, I was often one of the only Black students in my AP courses, right, having to fight the whole class on an issue about slavery or something, right, which I think poses its own difficulties. Like Deion was saying when you're the only Black student in the space, and especially in these like accelerated courses, right? Where they're singling you out as though you're ... Not that I'm not special or anything like that. But you become tokenized in some ways. I think it comes with perks, right? I don't think I was bothered too much by teachers. I had a lot of power in high school because I was in charge of a lot of organizations. I was dealing with administration a lot.

So, I think I didn't have maybe the average Black student experience because of how active and involved I became after realizing that these issues were important to me. So I started sitting on committees and pushing for things on campus and just being that loud mouth student who, basically, every faculty, staff member knew about by the end of the year type of thing. So, I would say I felt my Blackness as a student in college heavily. That's when I felt my confidence as a student significantly waiver was when I got to college, and that's the first time I ever started seeing bad grades.

I think it's a combination of things, right? Your first time being independent, you're a young person leaving your parents' home, you have all these feelings about being in a space that doesn't feel necessarily welcoming to you. You're taking courses that you don't identify with professors who don't seem to really care about who you are socially. This is Santa Barbara can be a very difficult space to get adjusted to as a Black student. There is a very limited Black student population at that which makes you feel very stifled and claustrophobic in ways. I mean, I would say that most Black students who attend UC Santa Barbara suffer from some type of mental health issue in their first few years here. Whether it's anxiety, depression, Santa Barbara has had a history of being known as being a party school. I've seen so many people start drinking heavily or basically spiral because it can be a very difficult place if you're not fortunate enough to find strong support early on.

**Deion:**

I have a question, and this is Deion. So I think that it's amazing that your school had a Black Studies Department, you said, or your high school because I wasn't aware that there was any high schools that had that in the country. But I was just curious that if you thought that having a Black Studies Department and just being taught by Black professors, do you think that changed or affected, because you said it radicalized you, but do you think it changed or affected any of the non-Black students, and how do you think it affected the culture of the school altogether?

**Raymok:**

Yeah. As you can imagine, the classes that were coming out of African American Studies Department were generally predominantly Black students who were taking these classes. But I mean, that's not to say that there weren't non-Black students who did take these courses. I honestly think they benefited significantly from being in spaces that were predominantly Black and hearing Black experiences and being able to contextualize it with the evidence, right, and the readings and the movies and whatever that that the teacher provided. I have one friend in particular who I remember distinctly, this white Jewish boy.

I'm not gonna put his name out there, but he became so ... I don't know how to explain it...he became so conscious after taking that class. We became really, really good friends after taking that class. Every Thursday, we would get lunch and talk about the current issues and all the plight of the world and all of these really deep-rooted ideas that were seeded in that in that course. I mean, I would say that I mean, the white kids in my class, they came out with some knowledge.

I think you have to in that in that type of situation, right? Just like when we are the minority group in any given situation, we're required to code switch and adjust and adapt and figure out ways to maneuver in these spaces, right? It's an important experience for these white students to see what is it that these Black students struggle with every day? What happened in history that connects to why this is happening today? In a classroom setting, because I think a classroom setting is something that's considered legitimate, right? Yeah, so yeah, I would say it was definitely effective.

**Ken:**

There's a new law that was passed recently in California that will require all 23 campuses of the California State University, a system that I was a part of for most of my career, to require all students who attend, to take an Ethnic Studies class. I'm sure that's a direct result of the Black Lives Matter Movement. But I suspect some of you would agree that Black Studies courses or Ethnic Studies courses would be useful and welcomed in high schools, that that's not too early to begin acquainting people and getting people thinking and talking and learning about ethnicity.

**Jenn:**

This is Jenn. Personally, I think people should honestly become aware of the idea of race as early as elementary school because kids and teachers perpetuate things that allow racism in the school place to continue. Teachers among themselves will talk about students a certain way, Black students or Latino students, talk about students, behind their back when students aren't present. Then they continue to perpetuate the things that hold the students down, like sending them out of the classroom because the teacher is upset, angry, they don't know how to respond to the student and things like that, or they see instances happening in the classroom or on the playground or in the school environment where other students are maybe saying things that they shouldn't be saying about Black students or about students that are nonwhite. There's no repercussion, because they don't know any better. I feel like that's something that needs to be addressed. Why don't they know any better? They should know better so these things don't happen, and so they can be prevented from happening as they move through higher education.

**Que'Aire:**

Yeah, I agree. I agree with Jenn. I mean, as early as what third, fourth grade, you are taught European tradition. I think that we're very far behind as far as including, I mean, the inclusivity of having Ethnic Studies. To me, if we're learning about white people in, I'm sorry, it's thunder storming here. But if we're learning about white people as early as third grade, why not learn about myself in the proper way at the same time?

**Ken:**

Obviously, you don't have courses, like Ethnic Studies in first grade. But I think what you're suggesting is that the topics of race and ethnicity and identity could be, and perhaps should be, an important part of the curriculum, something that teachers are talking with kids about and bringing it up when you're studying, reading books because there are plenty of opportunities to do that. I think a lot of teachers would need some support, having been a teacher educator myself and understanding what their role is, say as a kindergarten teacher or a third grade teacher, what culturally aware, culturally sensitive curriculum looks like for instance, and how to engage with students, maybe even especially in schools that are completely white, it's especially important. I think we can come back to that. But Jenn, you were just reacting to this conversation about what should happen at the elementary level. Let's use that as a segue into your own experience as a student.

**Jenn:**

Yeah. I became engaged in the GATE community like Gifted and Talented Education Program in second grade. Just in general, there weren't really many Black students at my school, it was my siblings and a few more maybe. There wasn't really any Black staff. I don't remember anyone Black actually the time I was there, I didn't have any Black teachers. So, I think in the educational space, that definitely contributed to me not knowing I was Black so much, not acknowledging that I guess. But I mean, I guess I knew I was Black at home because there's people that look like me.

So, we're all Black and the same, but once I come to school, it's like, I'm just another student. I wasn't being treated any differently and that might be because I was in the GATE program. So they're like, I'm the exception because I'm in the GATE program. So, I'm not like the other Black students who are not in the GATE program who maybe come to class to antagonize other students or to be loud that teachers will think about Black students.

So, I was in the GATE program all throughout my K-12 education. I guess I really wasn't involved in it in high school, though, but I don't think I was aware of my Blackness until maybe the end of high school when I decided I want to major in Black Studies, because that's when I realized I was like, I know nothing about Black history that I thought I knew. The things they're teaching us were so just basic, just Martin Luther King Jr. Malcolm X was bad. Rosa Parks sat in the back of the bus or on the front of the bus...

Rosa Parks wasn't the first to do that. No one knows that because Rosa Parks was a light skinned elderly woman, the first woman to do that was a dark skinned 15-year-old who was pregnant named Claudette Colvin. She set that off for during the Civil Rights Movement. But yeah, just to say I wasn't aware of being Black, so I wasn't really treated any differently. I guess students in high school and teachers would refer to me as being fierce or sassy or something like that, because I would snap back at people like for saying things that were out of, what they shouldn't be saying like people saying the N word.

I didn't go to school with many Black people, again, like I said, besides me and my siblings, and maybe a few other families that I knew. They didn't even live in the area, because the area's predominant Latino. People would say the N word around you like it was nothing. Sometimes it would just catch me like off guard, I didn't even know if I should say anything, or should I feel some type of way because they would judge you. They would just say, "I don't mean it like that. We don't mean any harm towards it."

But do you know that you're saying this to a Black person? You're saying this around a Black person that you consider to be your friend. It would just be super inconsiderate the way people would talk. So I guess I want to go back and point to Raymok, what she was saying about how students would benefit from African American Studies or some acknowledgement of that in the courses and in the classroom because this would definitely help students like become more aware of their surroundings. You can't just go around saying the N word. You shouldn't be saying it in the first place.

But I mean, be more aware of your surroundings and the way you talk about things around people who are Black or who may be sensitive to things like that because they know what the history of things are, and they know about themselves. Yeah, I just think that it doesn't start with the students. Definitely starts with the principals, the district and just implementation of race into the schools, besides just who's getting admitted into schools or who's just around. I think we need to bring up these discussions. It shouldn't be the responsibility of students to bring up discussions.

I would never bring anything up like that in class because I was most often the only Black student in the classroom in high school and throughout middle school. It's not like the conversations really ever came up because people weren't concerned with issues in the Black community or things that affected the Black community or their classmates that were Black. They were aware of things like that, that may be harmful to

them. So yeah, I think that these changes should definitely begin with the teachers and with principals and things like that.

**Ken:**

Yeah, well, thank you for sharing that, Jenn. Any comments, questions from others?

**Deion:**

I'll just reiterate what Jenn said because I felt I dealt with the same thing. Being one of the only Black kids in a classroom, you like hesitate to speak up on behalf of your Blackness because you're thinking like, "Oh, are the other kids gonna think I'm overboard or I'm overly sensitive." So that's definitely an issue I think a lot of Black kids have to deal with. In being in a school that doesn't really acknowledge race and being the only Black kid, you kind of feel like you're the only one that is going to do anything or the only one who might do it. It's just a lot of stress I feel like and a burden.

**Jenn:**

Might I add it was more difficult that I was a Black woman, and I would speak about these things. They would say, "Oh she's so outspoken," and things like that. It's like, "No, I'm just defending what needs to be defended. I don't want you thinking you have the right to call me the N word or calling your N word because the football boys, the Black football players or Black basketball players will be like, 'Oh, you they're just our friends.'" No, this is this is not okay. This is something that is deeper than just your friends. I don't want my friend calling me that. I'd freak out. That's crazy. I don't think anyone should be using those words if you're not Black. It's just something that just was let slide so many times. I think it really affected the way I handled talking to people from my high school and my hometown after high school because I realized so many people had so much racism, underlying racism and internalized racism, anti-Blackness tendencies that I wasn't even aware of until I came to college. I realized like these people probably shouldn't be doing these things. They definitely didn't know or care to know what the issues were that they were contributing to.

**Que'Aire:**

Yeah, I was going to say I definitely agree with Jenn and Dion. Just really quickly, I got to participate in a theater play that was virtual. Basically, the play was about culture shock. It had some scenes to that revolved around using the N word. Although a lot of people who do use the word are trying to reclaim the meaning of it, it also comes into question, you have people who are from for example, like Irreecha, Ethiopia, and their African experience doesn't necessary reflect the Black experience. Then it comes between me and them. Do they get to say it?

Although was to it was used to oppress people of the same skin color, it's like our struggles are different. That also comes into question when some people say, "Oh yeah, I don't mind if this person uses it or how do I know can I use it?" So just to kind of add that in. It's also, we don't really want nobody using the word. You've got to figure out because then it's like I have to figure out Can I use the word? Do I have the authority to tell you, you can use the word? That's a whole different story.

**Ken:**

I have a question for all of you. I hear people sometimes, and I'm sure you've heard people say, "I'm not racist. I'm colorblind." I've heard writers, several writers recently talk about how that is not anti-racist to be colorblind. In fact, it probably promotes racism. Can some of you speak to that a little bit? This whole idea of not paying attention to race and thinking that that somehow promotes an anti-racist way of thinking?

**Raymok:**

This is Raymok speaking. I think this push for post-racialism really got exacerbated after Obama was elected. I think the quote-unquote "intentions" of people who push racial agenda is to make the claim that I don't see race because we're all human and we're equal, right? It's supposed to be this very liberal and free ideology about, yeah about how race is manifesting nowadays, right? The world is better. We're post-civil rights. Obama

is president. We have a Black man as president. The world is all good now. But the reality is that is so beyond true.

I think for people of color, it's so obvious that is not true because of our day to day lived experiences. So it's very much, and I'm not saying that only white people push post this whole like, "I don't see race, colorblind ideology," because there are people of color who do it too. But I think it is very damaging. I think it speaks to the ongoing like, just like the fake white liberalism that we see all throughout ... Social media I think has also heightened white liberalism, these people who love to have their Black Lives Matter signs on their porches but don't speak to their Black neighbors, right, like these types of white liberals.

I just think that it really speaks to the ways in which racism is a constantly, constantly evolving concept. I don't want to call it witty, it's a sneaky one that you have to constantly keep an eye on because of how it evolves. So just like colonialism never ended, racism has never ended, and it is a way to ease white guilt, honestly, it's a way to ease white guilt and be like, "Look, there's some rich Black people. So, you poor Black people, it's your fault that you're poor," right? But we know how capitalism works. It's designed for very few people to be rich and a lot of people to be poor. So I don't know. Yeah, sorry to go on a bit of a tangent there. I definitely have a lot of issues in the ways in which people who promote colorblind ideologies and agendas are truly trying to erase POC experiences, and it's particularly anti-Black. It's especially anti-Black to be quote-unquote "colorblind".

**Ken:**

I want all of you, thank you for that, Raymok. I want all of you to be thinking about it one of the questions I think we'll probably conclude on. I'll tell you what the question is, and then I want to go back and see if anyone else wants to weigh in on this question of colorblindness. But I'm wondering what you think is the single most important thing that our school systems could do to disrupt racism. Maybe not the single most important thing, but one important thing that schools could do to disrupt racism. But before we get to that, I just want to see if anyone else wants to react to what Raymok was, her comments about colorblindness and my question about whether that is really anti-racist or something that as some writers have said promotes racism.

**Que'Aire:**

This is Que'Aire speaking. Just really fast. I think that it promotes racism, honestly, because it's like you don't see color, you don't see my struggles. You don't see what ancestors did survive for me to be here. Yeah, just to say, if you're colorblind, you don't you don't see me. You don't acknowledge my experiences as an African American.

**Deion:**

Pretty much what I was going to say, both Raymok and Que'Aire nailed it on the head. I think colorblindness or colorblind ideology is inherently racist. Like they said, it just erases the experiences and the specific struggles of Black people. The problem with that is that even if a person is like, "Oh, I'm colorblind, I don't see race, I don't acknowledge race." Well, there's certainly forces in society that do acknowledge race, like the prison industrial complex and the police. So then to be colorblind is to say, "No, it's not because you're Black," it's because something else and then that is just false. To be colorblind is not okay, it's problematic and it promotes racism.

**Ken:**

Great. So, let's shift to the last question that I raised a moment ago about what schools might do, what school systems might do, what policy makers might do, educators if they're interested in promoting an anti-racist agenda and disrupting racism. What comes to mind for you?

**Que'Aire:**

This is Que'Aire speaking. I remember reading a post where it says you're not born racist. You're taught racism. I feel like a lot of our teachers, professors have never taken an ethnic course class or they've never taken any African history classes. So it's how do you expect someone who's never taken the time out themselves to

educate, to be educated on a specific people to go educate these same people. So I think to disrupt that early on, we have to mandate that teachers, professors, anyone in the educational realm, they need to experience more than just one discipline, they need to know more than just math and English. They need to learn about different cultural practices, whether that's the way people dress, the way people eat certain foods, even vernacular, not saying that they need to be hip to it. But they need to have some type of experience or let me say they need to have some form of exposure to it.

**Ken:**

So that could occur not just when you're learning to become a teacher, but it could occur and maybe should occur for teachers who have had lots of experience in the classroom. Teachers spend a lot of time doing professional learning. I think what you're suggesting is some focus on race, and ethnicity, and the role it plays in society and in school settings could be really valuable.

**Que'Aire:**

Yeah, most schools have teacher development days once a week or once in a month or quarter, semester, whatever, they need to make sure that one of those days, although they need more than one, needs to be mandated to learning about this specific group of children that they're educating. That needs to be for all colleges too. We have that European traditions requirement. We need to make sure that we have an ethnic requirement because people need to learn that it's more than just the side of history that's put in our textbooks that's in these schools. We come from kings and queens, but we don't learn that. I mean, but yeah, to disrupt that they need to be taught themselves to say in short.

**Deion:**

Yeah, this is Deion. I agree with Que'Aire. What comes to mind for me are not one thing in particular, but two things that need to happen simultaneously. I think that you both need to have one, more Black teachers, and you need to rework, revamp, throw it out and make it work better is the curriculum in schools. It needs to be a more culturally relevant pedagogy because the education system we have now is lacking severely in Black teaching, both in terms of having Black teachers and the material itself.

I think Raymok was touching on this in the beginning of the podcast, but part of the consequence of having this really white washing of history is you have people who go into their adult life on just polar ends of a political spectrum, right? On one end, you have Black people who are voicing to society, their real social experiences, their day to day experiences with oppression. Then on the other side, you have people because they've been misinformed to be like, "No, the police, they protect and serve," or "This confederate flag, it's actually Southern heritage." But they've been taught that, like Que'Aire said, that you're taught to be racist, to be ignorant. So, I think it would just serve this country well if you have more Black teachers and revamp the educational curriculum into where it's implementing a Black perspective, and really teaching history more accurately.

**Ken:**

Thanks, Deion. Jennifer, some thoughts about this?

**Jenn:**

Yeah, I was just going to say that one of the first steps I think to even allowing Ethnic Studies or anything like that to be incorporated into the education system, K-12, graduate, undergrad is that these people who have been teaching for a long time, and the people making rules and things like that, and passing laws probably need to acknowledge first that they might be racist. Because without acknowledging that themselves, there's no way that they can go on just allowing or putting themselves out of the way so people can learn about race and racist ideologies and white supremacy because they're enforcing it.

I mean, they're not addressing it themselves, like saying, "Oh, like maybe I've had these on my own reservations because of this reason." Instead, they just say what everyone says like, "I'm not racist, even

though I've done this and I've called people this and that or I've allowed things to continue," like the mistreatment of Black students on campus or allowing Black students to constantly be thrown out of class.

Maybe before acknowledging the actual curriculum, they need to acknowledge the way they treat their Black students and the things that they say that perpetuates the reason or the ways that their Black students are treated in school and in the world because our lives are bigger than just education, whether we are the exceptional student or not. We have real lives that we live outside of school and that they have no idea about. Teachers, educators need to be aware of socio-cultural things, because without that, they won't be able to really give students the actual things that they need to survive after high school, after college, which a lot of us probably didn't have the benefit of receiving knowledge and things like that or how to really go into the world with thinking about race. Everything is just no, we don't need to think about race. Race is such an issue. Race is an issue. But it's an issue because we keep ignoring it.

**Ken:**

I could imagine, Jenn, that a really courageous teacher could actually begin a school year by saying, "I'm learning about what it means to be anti-racist. I know that there are things that I have done and that I do, sometimes unwittingly that are racist, and I want to hear from you, my students. I want feedback from you about how I am as a person and as a teacher in whether anything strikes you as being racist because one of the best ways I can learn about it is to understand what your experience is like." But that would take a lot of courage for a teacher who's supposed to be the knowledgeable one, the master of everything, or at least of their subject, and to do what you're suggesting would take some guts.

**Jenn:**

It would take guts, but it would take one day in the classroom to acknowledge your racism and how you've played a part in allowing the system to continue doing what it does. I'm sure students aren't going to jump out of their tables or off their desk and saying, "We don't want to talk about race in here." The only issue I feel like that would come out of something like that would be their parents at home telling them because their parents perpetuate racism, their parents were probably racist. Their parents will be telling them well, "We don't want you to learn this and that." Because I just saw a Facebook post on my neighborhood, Hooper Valley Facebook page. It was a parent so upset that their high school student was learning about how to be anti-racist. The parents were saying this is why they don't want us watching our students screens while they're at home because this is what they're teaching them, and it's about how to not be racist. Why are you angry that your child is learning how not to be racist?

**Ken:**

Someone like the author of *White Fragility* would say, this is white solidarity. It's a way of protecting ourselves.

**Jenn:**

Exactly.

**Ken:**

That whole idea of anti-racist curriculum or anti-racist agenda is a threat to people who think that being anti-racist is somehow going to be condemning or take something away. You're seeing this play out in the current election. This is a huge part of the current debate among our candidates right now is race. It's about what you just talked about.

**Jenn:**

This has been popping up so much, honestly, within the past year. I'm sorry, I just saw an ad, a Trump ad, on YouTube, and it was saying, like, "Our America is only going to be American. It's not going to be about what they want. No more battles or anything like that." Talking about Black Lives Matter. Not what they want. That's what it said. The ad says, "It's not going to be what they want. It's going to be our America again." Then to his comment talking about how white suburban moms won't be bothered by the Black population in their

communities anymore. It's just like, "Well, how much more American is it going to get before, including everyone else that they supposedly be talking about being a part of the American dream and making up the American democracy?" It's not like everyone's being included in that.

**Ken:**

People have gotten good at coded language and so they don't necessarily say, "To be American is to be white." But if you read between the lines, that seems to be a message. As a Black person yourself and others, that's the message that you and many others hear.

**Jenn:**

Exactly.

**Ken:**

Raymok, I think you're the last one who hasn't yet weighed in on this question about what we can do to make schools less racist.

**Raymok:**

Yeah, what I'm going to recommend is it's going to be big and probably not the most feasible, but it's because it's the best option, I think. While I think everybody's points are good points, I think they're just small band aids. I don't think that they're anything that will truly, truly make the school system anti-racist. I think it's built on a racist structure. So regardless of if we hire more Black teachers, right, UCSB has been making an active effort to hire more Black professors. What does it matter if these professors are also dealing with anti-Blackness and don't have support structures to help them, right, do the work that they need to do to teach students?

We have tenure track which is a deeply flawed system and keeps the most terrible professors in a space, right, protects people who don't deserve to be protected, gives people raises and promotions for very shallow reasons, I would say, oftentimes. There are so many diversity trainings that have happened, anti-Blackness workshops that have happened. I mean, these are things that ... These are issues that are constantly being worked on in educational settings. However, I haven't seen really the most profound outcomes out of them.

So, in my opinion, we need to dismantle how the education system as we have imagined it for all of these years and create something completely brand new, completely fresh, right? Why is it that we have to learn in the classroom. Classrooms feel like jail sometimes. You know what I mean? Why is it that we have to learn in these ways? There are so many ways to learn in this world, but we have been taught in these very Eurocentric ways there. In Africa, you go under a tree and your elder tells you a story and you learn so much from that one story. I just feel like there's so many different ways, and so many different cultural practices of sharing knowledge that we don't privilege, that we ignore, that we marginalize as not knowledge. I think that, yeah, we need to completely rethink our school systems.

Why can't we learn outside? Why can't we learn independently? Why are our teachers our authorities, why can't we not be on the same level as our teachers? Sometimes my teachers do not know more than me, but they're getting a paycheck and I'm not, right? So I just feel like we need to reconsider this very hierarchical way of learning because most of our structures in this society are hierarchical. So maybe we need to figure out a way to make them less vertical and more horizontal, right? So those are just quick ideas.

**Ken:**

Raymok, thank you for that. I want to say thanks to all of you for sharing ideas about how to improve our schools. I think we have this opportunity with Black Lives Matter Movement and people paying attention, and laws being passed to require ethnic studies classes. It's true that some of these may be band aids that we need to do what you suggest, Raymok, which is to rethink the whole system. But as we rethink the whole system, I

think there are concrete suggestions that all of you have made about things that we can do, including recruiting and supporting Black teachers and Black professors.

So, as we bring this Teacher Stories podcast episode to close again, I want to thank all of my guests for sharing their experiences and perspectives about what it means to be a Black student in American public schools today. Listeners, if you have a teacher story you'd like to share, then you can tell us about it on [TeacherStories.org](https://www.teacherstories.org). Thanks listening. Bye, everyone.