

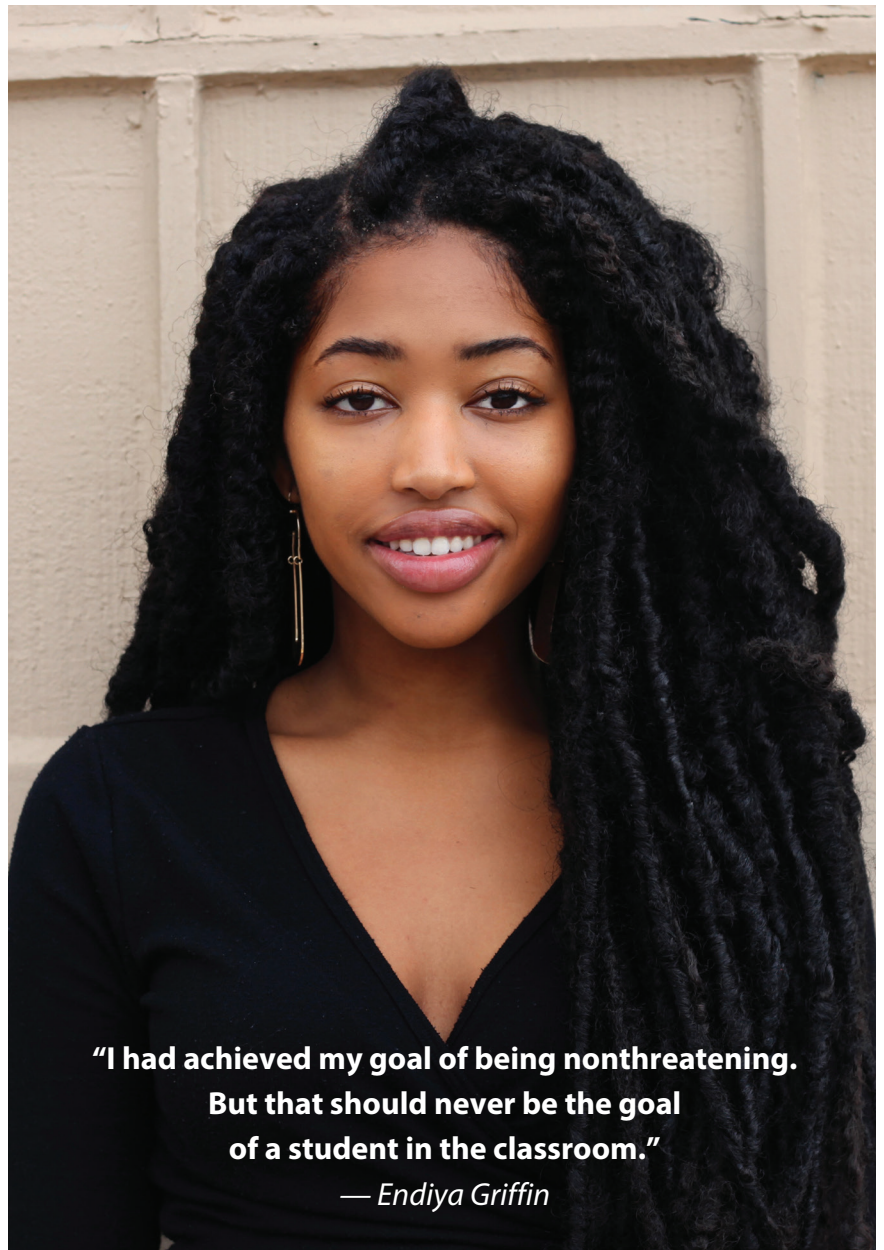
# SEE ME FOR WHO I AM

TO BEST SERVE STUDENTS,  
EQUIP TEACHERS WITH  
CULTURAL COMPETENCY

BY ENDIYA GRIFFIN

**O**n the first day of 1st grade, I walked into class to discover that mine was the only black face in the room. We began the day by introducing ourselves and showing off the self-portraits that we'd made over the summer.

I rose cautiously to present my Crayola-colored masterpiece, but before I could even say my name, a boy in my class asked me why my portrait was



**“I had achieved my goal of being nonthreatening.  
But that should never be the goal  
of a student in the classroom.”**

— Endiya Griffin

Photo by CHRISTINA CHOMUT

brown, saying that brown was ugly. I froze. My face grew red, and tears began to fill my eyes.

However, what was most painfully disappointing at that moment was not what was said, but what wasn't. My teacher stood there just as silently as me, then beckoned me to continue. She never addressed the boy or his awful words.

Unfortunately, my experience was not unique. Experiences like these

characterize the education careers of so many students of color. The prevalence of these encounters exposes a lack of cultural competence in schools.

Many organizations, such as the National Education Association (NEA, n.d.), have written policy briefs explaining the need for cultural competence within a diverse cultural climate. But cultural competence is not the norm.

In the field of health care, cultural

incompetence has long been recognized as an issue (Graves, Like, Kelly, & Hohensee, 2007), and legislation is being written to intervene. We need to do the same with education.

To best serve students, we must urge districts to require that all faculty engage in extensive cultural competency training. No student deserves to endure a teacher who remains silent in the face of oppression.

## SYSTEMIC INEQUALITY

According to a recent study that analyzed the changes in our education landscape over the past 65 years, schools have become more segregated at the expense of public education (Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee, & Ayscue, 2019). Schools often closely resemble the neighborhoods in which they are located, so, due to redlining, black and Latinx students are more likely than their white counterparts to attend impoverished schools that serve majority students of color.

These schools often do not have the resources to adequately equip students to escape cyclical poverty. Their children end up going to the school where they will likely have the same exact experience — the cycle continues. This type of pattern takes place all over the country and reinforces racial and socioeconomic inequalities (Chang, 2018).

The flip side of this pattern is a phenomenon referred to as “isolation” (Reardon & Owens, 2014). Isolation is a way to measure school segregation by looking at students who attend schools with a low proportion of a given racial group. Because the majority of white

### WHAT IS ‘CODE-SWITCHING’?

Watch Endiya Griffin, at right, and Tatiana Howell discuss the value of code-switching, the practice of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of language in conversation. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtINpW1j-m4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtINpW1j-m4)



students attend schools that are at least 75% white, it is far more common for a student of color to be one of the only students of his or her race than it is for a white student (McFarland et al., 2017).

At the same time, teachers of color are overwhelmingly outnumbered by their white colleagues, accounting for only 20% of educators in public K-12 education (Geiger, 2018). This means that most white students will be taught by teachers who look like them for their entire education careers whereas students of color (and especially male students of color) will be lucky if they get a handful of teachers who look like them.

The white dominance of education in our ever-diversifying society often means that educators are not trained in cultural competence — and for kids with stories like mine, that can mean suppressing pieces of our cultural identities just to fit in at school (Griffin & Howell, 2019).

Up until the 9th grade, I attended schools that were predominantly white and employed predominantly white

faculty. As a black girl, that meant being stared at mercilessly by students and teachers alike as we discussed subjects like slavery, being petted like an animal anytime I came to school with a new hairstyle, and constantly getting in trouble for being “too sassy.” My behavior cards seemed to change from green to yellow on a near-daily basis.

My battles, however, were minor compared with those of the few black boys in my class, whose cards seemed to be permanently set on red. As with many black boys around the country (GAO, 2018), minor infractions often led to yelling and frequent visits to the principal rather than genuine attempts to understand the alleged issue and its roots. I quickly internalized the trauma of watching them be so rampantly criminalized and began to self-police.

I was determined to be the nonthreatening black girl. No poofy hairstyles, no hands on my hips, no talking back — nothing that would make my teachers treat me the way they

treated my black male peers. I began to code-switch without even recognizing it, leaving my blackness at the door whenever I stepped onto my school’s campus and replacing it with “whiter” things such as straight A’s and “proper” diction.

I was rewarded for these acts of assimilation with things like honor roll and selection for class activities. I had achieved my goal of being nonthreatening. But that should never be the goal of a student in the classroom.

**CULTURALLY COMPETENT CLASSROOMS**

Students of color should not be tasked with mitigating the underlying biases of their teachers. For teachers to do their job effectively, these biases must be eradicated before they even enter the classroom.

Here are my four recommendations to educators for creating culturally competent, identity-supporting, and inclusive classrooms.

**1. Acknowledge and check your biases.**

Recognizing that our biases exist is the first step in eradicating them. Implicit biases are ubiquitous and often result from cultural conditioning, media portrayals, and personal upbringing. But it’s not enough to know they exist. We have to learn where our biases lay and actively work to unlearn them by replacing false narratives with truth.

**2. Question problematic behavior.**

Whether it is private conversation among colleagues or classroom chatter, it is important to question behavior that demeans, disrespects, or threatens students of color to preserve the integrity and safety of education spaces. As my 11th-grade advisor frequently said, “What you allow, you encourage.” When you witness the propagation of discrimination and miseducation, it is important to intervene.

Through open conversation about bias, you can encourage new

perspectives and enrich discourse by researching the roots of those biases.

**3. Support self-expression.**

Hold space for students to express themselves and their identities to create a classroom culture where students and teachers learn as a community. While “diverse” students should not be exploited for their unique experiences (i.e. always expecting them to share when topics related to their identities arise), creating opportunities for students to voluntarily offer anecdotes and insight or even simply be themselves in the classroom can dismantle implicit bias by creating empathy and communal understanding.

**4. Hire faculty with diverse identities.**

The low percentage of teachers of color in schools today is unacceptable, especially considering that, as society progresses, we are becoming more and more diverse. Not only must education administration consider ethnic diversity in its hiring patterns, but also diversity in terms of age, religion, sexual identity, socioeconomic status, ability, and gender identity.

When educators reflect the variety of the world that we live in, they can better equip students to thrive by fostering creativity, promoting empathy, reducing prejudice, and improving student achievement.

As I reflect on my 1st-grade experience, I believe that, had each of these suggestions been implemented adequately at my school and throughout the system, my teacher would have had the confidence to rise up against my classmate’s misinformed and microaggressive comments and create a culturally competent learning environment where I felt seen as a student — and, more importantly, as a person.

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