



## Dear White Teachers, Are You Like Amy Cooper?

By Educator Barnes – May 27, 2020

The majority of US teachers are white females. What I know for certain is it is possible that many Black children could go through their entire education without ever having a Black teacher. This means, that each year, I should expect that my twin sons' teachers will be white females. If you are a white female teacher and you are choosing to teach black children, I need you to hear me today. You need to interrogate yourself and determine if you are like Amy Cooper when it comes to our Black male students.

First, if you are one of those white teachers who proclaims to not see color, please exit now. This isn't for you. You have other issues to address first. If you have moved past the colorblind approach, remember you are still not out of the woods yet. Ask yourself, have you ever used your privilege as a teacher to call for backup to remove a Black male student from your class when you did not call for help when a white student did the same action? Have you ever continuously wrote up a Black male student to create a paper trail to give him more consequences even when other students did the same thing? Have you ever chosen to not call Black students' parents to gain perspective to help your Black students because you just wanted revenge or a consequence to happen? If you can answer yes to any of these questions, or if you can't quickly say no and have to think a minute, you are part of the problem.

Christian Cooper, a grown Black man, simply asked a white lady to follow the rules of the park and keep her dog on the leash. She was not scared; she was mad that a Black man addressed her and pushed back on what she was doing. I have been the confidant of many Black male students throughout my career who have told me of the consequences they have faced from white teachers from rightfully questioning their authority or pushing back on what the teacher did. It is not only Black males, but Black females have confided in me also. My school did twin day during spirit week. A Black student and a white student decided to dress alike. They went beyond dressing alike; they had on the exact same brand and style of pants and shirts. Their clothes were identical. A white teacher wrote up the Black student and not the white student because she thought the Black girl was wearing jeggings which violated the dress code. She wasn't. The girls came to me for help. I told them to walk together to the principal's office and say I had sent them. I felt they needed to name drop me because I rarely send students to the office which would get the principal's attention and have them be heard. This is one of many cases.

Honestly, I don't have to look any further than my own home. This school year my son said, "Why did I get kicked out of class for talking? I wasn't talking to myself?" My son was talking to another student, and they were both asked to stop. They stopped, and then started talking again. No, my son should not have been talking during instruction. Then, he was asked to leave. To make matters worse, he kicked the door on the way out and slammed it. Trust and believe that he received consequences at home for this. In his explanation, he said, "I know it was wrong to kick and slam the door, but she kicked me out. Only me. I wasn't talking to myself. The other kid got to stay in class."

If you work in a school with Black children long enough, you know the white female teachers that will call the school resource officer, the principal, the dean, or anyone that will remove a Black child from their classroom. They use their privilege so they don't have to deal with Black children. Maybe, just maybe, you're not that white teacher. Maybe you are friends with those white teachers. Have you ever confronted them? Have you ever asked them why they keep kicking Jamal out of class every day? If you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem because you are watching the problem happen.

Let's go beyond the white teachers. What about the white administrators? Are you allowing this to take place in your school? I'm tired of sitting in meetings where we look at discipline data and then the response is to train everyone and address no one. If you are a white administrator and you know it's the Black males that are getting kicked out of class and suspended as a disproportionate rate in comparison to your white students, then do something about it. You can look at the data to determine which white teachers are known for this behavior. But instead of making it uncomfortable for them to continue this abuse of power, you allow it to continue because you don't have the courage to address it, or you don't understand why it is a problem.

When my Black sons were four and in preschool, the principal of the Catholic preschool they attended called my husband and me to ask if we were exposing our Black sons to sexual content. A little white girl in their class told her mother that my boys were mistreating her on the playground. The principal called us and said that a parent had reported that one of our sons bent her daughter over playground equipment and came upon her from behind. She said this to us about our four-year-old son. We had her on speakerphone. Then, she asked if we were exposing our twin sons to sexual content. My husband and I locked eyes in disbelief. I took a deep breath and calmly said, "You mean my son tackled another student from behind just like he tackles his twin brother almost every day. He is just playing around...and no, they haven't been exposed to sexual content." White women are good at reframing the narrative to suit their purposes. White teachers and administrators should not do this, support it, or be part of this. We should have never been called by that white principal. She took the word of that white parent as the gospel truth without considering how absurd the story was. Too bad there wasn't videotape evidence from this playground experience to prove to the principal that this was ridiculous.

This story does not play out only in Central Park; this story is happening on a daily basis in classrooms across America. White teachers are either doing this or watching it happen in silence. When Black educators speak up about it, instead of coming to their defense, you

decide to not get involved. That is not good enough. If you are choosing to be in front of Black students, if you are choosing to be in front of my Black children, I expect, no, I demand more of you. My taxes are going toward your salary. The least you could do is to not use your privilege against my children.

If you read this and you are mad or you are uncomfortable, good! Change is not easy. I'm a Black woman in America. My life is a mix of good intermingled with discomfort, mistreatment, and racism. All I'm asking is for you to sit with this and then think about what you are going to do differently. Maybe you need to ask for help and support so you are not kicking Black boys out and writing them up. Maybe you need to have a conversation, many conversations, with other white teachers who don't see color or are using their privilege against Black children. You must do something. Inaction and being silent can no longer be an option.