

## Teacher: A student told me I ‘couldn’t understand because I was a white lady.’ Here’s what I did then.

Emily E. Smith is a fifth-grade social justice and English language arts teacher at Cunningham Elementary School in Austin, Tex. She was just awarded the 2015 Donald H. Graves Excellence in the Teaching of Writing award given at the National Teachers of English Language Arts Convention in Minneapolis. Smith created and founded The Hive Society, a classroom that inspires children to creatively explore literature through critical thinking and socially relevant texts.

In her speech accepting the award, Smith talked about a seminal moment in her career when she realized she needed to change her approach to teaching students of color, one of whom told her that she couldn’t understand his problems because she is white. The following is an excerpt of the speech in which she discusses her transformation (and which I am publishing with permission).

From Smith’s speech:

I’m white. My classroom is not. Sure, it’s been my dream to work at an “urban” school. To work with kids whose challenges I could never even fathom at such a young age. And changing at-risk lives through literature is almost a media cliché by now. These were, however, how I identified myself at the beginning of my teaching career. I was a great teacher. I taught children how to truly write for the first time and share meaningful connections on a cozy carpet. We made podcasts about music lyrics and filled our favorite books so full with annotated sticky notes that they would barely close. We even tiptoed into the alien world of free verse poetry.



But something was missing. If you've already forgotten, I'm white. "White" is kind of an uncomfortable word to announce, and right now people may already be unnerved about where this is going. Roughly 80 percent of teachers in the United States today are white. Yet the population of our students is a palette. That means America's children of color will, for the majority of their school years, **not** have a teacher who is a reflection of their own image. Most of their school life they will be told what to do and how to do it by someone who is white, and most likely female. Except for a few themed weeks, America's children of color will read books, watch videos, analyze documents and study historical figures who are also not in their image.

I've been guilty of that charge. But things changed for me the day when, during a classroom discussion, one of my kids bluntly told me I "couldn't understand because I was a white lady." I had to agree with him. I sat there and tried to speak openly about how I could never fully understand and went home and cried, because my children knew about white privilege before I did. The closest I could ever come was empathy.

My curriculum from then on shifted. We still did all of the wonderful things that I had already implemented in the classroom, except now the literature, the documents, the videos, the discussions, the images embodied the issues that my children wanted to explore. We studied the works of Sandra Cisneros, Pam Munoz Ryan and Gary Soto, with the intertwined Spanish language and Latino culture – so fluent and deep in the memories of my kids that I saw light in their eyes I had never seen before. We analyzed Langston Hughes's "Let America be America Again" from the lens of both historical and current events and realized that the United States is *still* the land that has never been. The land that my kids, after reading an excerpt from Ta-Nehisi Coates's letter to his son that connected so deeply to their personal experiences, decided they still wanted to believe in. The land they decided to still hope for. The land that one of my kids quietly said would be changed by her generation. A generation of empathy.

We read about the Syrian crisis, analyzing photographs of war-torn faces at the border and then wrote poetry of hope, despair and compassion from the perspectives of the migrants. Many of my kids asked to write about their own journeys across the border and their [dreams] for a better future. One child cried and told me he never had a teacher who honored the journey his family took to the United States. He told me he was not ashamed anymore, but instead proud of the sacrifice his parents made for him.

We listened to StoryCorps podcasts by people from different walks of life, and children shared their own stories of losing pets, saying goodbye to a mother or father in jail, the fear of wearing a hoodie while walking to a 7-Eleven, and thriving under the wing of a single parent who works two jobs.

So as I stand here today I can declare that I am no longer a language arts and social studies teacher, but a self-proclaimed teacher of social justice and the art of communication with words.

Looking back, I think that my prior hesitation to talk about race stemmed from a lack of social education in the classroom. A lack of diversity in my own life that is, by no means, the fault of my progressive parents, but rather a broken and still segregated school system. Now that I'm an educator in that system, I've decided to stand unflinching when it comes to the real issues facing our children today, I've decided to be unafraid to question injustice, unafraid to take risks in the classroom – I am changed. And so has my role as a teacher.

I can't change the color of my skin or where I come from or what the teacher workforce looks like at this moment, but I *can* change the way I teach. So I *am* going to soapbox about something after all. Be the teacher your children of color deserve. In fact, even if you don't teach children of color, be the teacher America's children of color deserve, because we, the teachers, are responsible for instilling empathy and understanding in the hearts of all kids. We are responsible for the future of this country.

So teach the texts that paint *all* the beautiful faces of our children and tell the stories of struggle and victory our nation has faced. Speak openly and freely about the challenges that are taking place in our country at this very moment. Talk about the racial and class stereotypes plaguing our streets, our states, our society. You may agree that black and brown lives matter, but how often do you explore what matters to those lives in your classroom?

Put aside your anxieties and accept your natural biases. Donald Graves once said, "Children need to hang around a teacher who is asking bigger questions of herself than she is asking of them." I know I'm going to continue to ask the bigger questions of myself and seek the answers that sometimes feel impossible, because my kids deserve it ... you're welcome to join me. Thank you.



Find out more about Ms. Smith and the Hive Society at [www.hivesociety.weebly.com](http://www.hivesociety.weebly.com)

