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Gina Calbeto
Educational Leadership Graduate Student
Florida Gulf Coast University

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Book Review: Kendi: How to be an Antiracist

Gina Calbeto¹

¹Educational Leadership Graduate Student
Florida Gulf Coast University, United States
gcalbeto9212@eagle.fgu.edu

Review

In *How to be an Antiracist* (2019), the author, Ibram X. Kendi, describes his own upbringing and the experiences of his parents through the stitching together of specific retellings both passed down and lived firsthand. In this process, Kendi offers alternate responses and actions that are actively antiracist and more mindful of the lived experiences of people of color.

Before presenting most of the anecdotes that introduce each chapter, he takes the time to define several terms that will be crucial to understanding his proposals. He takes the time to clarify the difference between “not racist” and “antiracist.” Simply being “not racist” allows for continued inaction, whereas being “antiracist” requires awareness of, and action in response to, racial inequality. Of all the terms he took the time to introduce to his audience, Kendi’s description of discrimination stood out to me as an educator. Kendi (2019) wrote:

But if racial discrimination is defined as treating, considering, or making a distinction in favor or against an individual based on that person’s race, then racial discrimination is not inherently racist. The defining question is whether the discrimination is creating equity or inequity. If the discrimination is creating equity, then it is antiracist. If discrimination is creating inequity, then it is racist. (p. 22)

Kendi wastes no time eliminating a misconception that much of his audience may hold. By highlighting the distinction between antiracist discrimination and racist discrimination, Kendi addresses the common misunderstanding that all racial discrimination is racist. Kendi’s distinction between the two is especially crucial in understanding the personal stories he retells that take place in academic spaces.

Kendi’s recollection of what it was like to see a black, female classmate go intentionally overlooked in his third-grade class should especially upset any educator reading *How to be an Antiracist*. It is what the White teacher does in response to Kendi’s small action in defense of what he saw that presents educators with a chance to reflect on their own practices in the classroom.

When Kendi refuses to leave the chapel, his teacher approaches him with a harsh tone and makes commands. The difference between the language and tone aimed at Kendi versus the gentle consideration afforded to his White peers is jarring. There is a sharpness and a lack of patience that Kendi's teacher seems to reserve specifically for her students of color. The goal of the educator taking time to read *How to be an Antiracist* should be to be everything this teacher wasn't in this instance. Non-minoritized, White educators are often privileged to read Kendi's lived experience rather than live it themselves, but all educators can benefit from Kendi's reflective and relevant text. With this awareness there are some questions that all educators, but especially White educators, should consider for cultivating an inclusive classroom community more beneficial to all than the one that Kendi describes from his own childhood. All educators should consider whether their tone and communication choices meet the needs of each student in the classroom. Educators should look at their current communication critically and consider how to minimize excess harshness and influence from bias. Developing this self-awareness as educators is a necessary step in the right direction. One cannot be the antiracist educator that Kendi describes without first taking this step.

Kendi (2019) also shares, "We are what people see us as, whether what they see exists or not" (p. 40). Of all the takeaways available to educators who pick up *How to be an Antiracist*, teachers should already know this to be true. Often, the perception we give to others is longer lasting and has the potential to be more damaging than anything else we may accomplish in our school day. Much of successful teaching is dependent on our ability to communicate with those around us. PreK-12 teachers are responsible for forging relationships and successfully communicating with their students, their coworkers, administration, parents/guardians, university partners and the greater community. As Kendi's recollection of his third-grade teacher shows, racist actions, when taken in the classroom, can impress lasting trauma on a student and shatter any chances of building a meaningful relationship between student and teacher. Kendi (2019) states, "With racist teachers, misbehaving kids of color do not receive inquiry and empathy and legitimacy. We receive orders and punishments and 'no excuses', as if we are adults" (p. 51). The three elements of successful communication that Kendi highlights, inquiry, empathy, and legitimacy, are too often exclusively offered to the White students of a classroom. Social justice scholar-educator Rajni Shankar-Brown (2016) further highlights Kendi's point in her own research when she explains, "Pervasive, unequal treatment of Black and Brown students within schools is well documented, as is the overwhelming silence of public school stakeholders. Students of color are disproportionately punished through detention, suspension, and expulsion" (p. 50). Shankar-Brown calls on educators to actively engage in contemplative practice and to mindfully prioritize equity in education, including by intentionally self-reflecting on bias and affirming diverse communities and identities.

An educator looking to improve their practices in the classroom can come away from reading *How to be an Antiracist* and informally self-assess how they speak daily with their students. In this self-assessment, consideration should be given to how well students needs were met through communication and how many student interactions throughout the day were negative. If a pattern can be identified in these negative interactions or if the negative interactions are frequent, the teacher should especially consider how they can mend the student-teacher relationships identified. However, racism and excessive punishment can exist in a classroom without the presence of an

easily identifiable pattern. Therefore, teachers must reflect on their communication efforts daily and understand that their words have power. After self-reflection, we have an obligation as professionals to determine what changes need to be made to bring more inquiry, more empathy, and more legitimacy to the conversations we hold with diverse students, and, as a result, better our whole classroom communities.

Kendi (2019) speaks on the criticism that is aimed at Black spaces when he says, “To be antiracist is to recognize there is no such thing as the ‘real world,’ only real words, multiple world views” (p. 174). Shankar-Brown recalls instances where teachers were defensive, careless, or showed indifference in response to the unacceptable impacts of racism felt by her own children in school, both unintentionally and intentionally. Shankar-Brown (2016) writes, “Sadly, they too have experienced bullying and exclusion inside and outside of school; and when incidents have occurred in school, they have often been met with refutation or apathy from educators” (p. 49). Being “not racist” as a teacher does not absolve educators from heading the call to engage in antiracist practices. Being an onlooker is as bad as being the perpetrator. As Shankar-Brown put it, the “brush it off” response to blatant injustice is not acceptable and it is essential we focus on equity in our schools. While the classroom teacher may have experience or skillsets to fully understand multiple world views firsthand, it is the duty of the classroom teacher to understand that their students are coming to the classroom door with cultural experiences and world views that differ from their own or from the dominant structures often existing in our schools. Knowing this, it then becomes the responsibility of the classroom teacher to use this awareness of multiple world views to inform how they speak, how they teach, and how they act in response to any expression of needs from a student. In *Bending the Arc Toward Justice: Equity-Focused Practices for Educational Leaders* (2021), Shankar-Brown discusses many significant and harrowing racial disparities in education and adverse impacts on educational outcomes, and she urgently calls for prioritization of anti-racist and equity-centered practices while also recommending Kendi’s book as a valuable resource. In spite of persistent racial inequality, both Shankar-Brown and Kendi remain optimistic and note that education is a transformative force in our world.

I highly recommend that educators read Kendi’s *How to be an Antiracist*, as the book provides a solid foundation for critical self-reflection with historical and present-day connections that are interlinked to teaching and learning. Kendi uses cancer as a metaphor for racism, stating both are metastatic, and his book provides ideas for combating and helping to cure systemic racism. He discusses how racism in terms of ideas and policies are perpetuated in education, and he reminds us that fighting racism requires informed action.

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