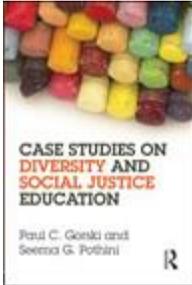


Case Study 6.4: (Racist) Terms of Endearment



Written by Paul C. Gorski (gorski@edchange.org) and Seema Pothini (sg1515@hotmail.com) for their book, *Case Studies on Diversity and Social Justice Education* (Routledge, 2014). Check out the book for this more than 30 additional school- and classroom based case studies on issues like race, class, (dis)ability, gender, sexual orientation, and religion.

Synopsis: A high school math teacher overhears a White student directing the N-word at an African American classmate. When she confronts him, he claims that he was using it as a term of endearment—a claim that is not explicitly contested by the “friend” to whom he’s directing it.

Points for Consideration

- Even if—and this is a very big *if*—Reggie sincerely wasn’t offended by Anthony’s use of the term, it was very likely that other students, like Keisha, *were* offended, including students who were not African American.
- Reggie’s discomfort as Ms. Lawson prodded him about the situation might suggest that, in some ways, he really *wasn’t* fine with Anthony using the n-word around him. In some social contexts, people who are the targets of oppressive language, whether the users of that language are intending to be offensive or not, might feel at least a temporary need to play along and pretend they are not offended, knowing there is a social price to pay for speaking up.
- There might also be cases in which students, hearing words like the n-word used as a matter of course in popular culture, are not completely tuned into the words’ histories or even their full contemporary implications. This is why it is important for us, as educators, to inform ourselves about words and phrases used by our students that are discriminatory, from variations on the n-word to “retard” or “that’s so gay.”
- Ms. Lawson felt prepared to take instructional advantage of the diversity in her school but she was not prepared to facilitate difficult conversations, such as one about the use of the n-word, with her students. As educators, we must equip ourselves with strategies for engaging students in conversations about these issues, as not doing so could suggest that we condone bias or injustice.