

Beyond Diversity: Reflections on Participation from Two Women of Color



Engaging in conversations about race is difficult for many people, irrespective of their race. What makes these kinds of conversations so hard is that the speaker is often unsure of how the listener will interpret what is said or how the listener will respond. This concern about, or fear of, misinterpretation is often heightened when the people in the conversation are racially different. But people working to engage in more conversations about race do not need to remain in places of concern or fear. With support, it is possible to move toward a place of comfort.

One avenue for support to engage in conversations about race is to attend a Beyond Diversity seminar, a “two-day seminar designed to help leaders, educators, students, parents, administrators and community participants understand the impact of race on student learning and investigate the role that racism plays in institutionalizing academic achievement disparities” (Pacific Education Group, 2018). This article describes the range of emotions and subsequent learnings of two Black women who engaged in the Beyond Diversity seminar. The questions that preface each section are included to organize the themes we found in our reflections and share our similar or different perspectives.

Let’s start with why we both choose to go to a seminar to learn how to talk

about race. As women of color, don't we already know how to do that?

Dwaina: I decided to attend this seminar twice. The first time was with people from the Knowles Teacher Initiative, which I will refer to as my Knowles training, and the second time was at the request of my school principal, which I will refer to as my district training. I always want to talk about race and to get better at having conversations about race with both white people and people of color.

Ayanna: I've been working on learning more about issues of equity as they relate to education for more than a decade. When I learned about this seminar from others at Knowles, I thought it would be a great opportunity.

Dwaina, can you say more about why you chose to attend with members from your different learning communities?

Dwaina: In 2018, I decided to attend the Beyond Diversity seminar that was held right before the Knowles Teacher Initiative Summer Meeting. The opportunity to talk about race with members of a community I've grown to love and trust was an easy decision to make. The previous Summer Meeting had many formal and informal race talks surrounding the Book Committee's decision for us all to read *Mathematical Mindsets* (Boaler, 2016). During the book panel discussion, many Knowles Fellows felt the topic of race was purposefully skirted. In my teaching career, I have mostly operated under the belief that if I want to feel represented in any space or conversation, I have to represent myself. If Knowles Fellows within their own cohorts and affinity groups want to start conversations around race, I need to attend Beyond Diversity in order to be represented in the conversation and in the work they want to do moving forward.

My reason for deciding to attend with my school-based colleagues was different. I switched schools for the 2018-2019 school year for many reasons. One was that I wanted to teach in a school where I felt represented in the staff and in the student population. My new principal nominated me to attend the Beyond Diversity training in the fall of 2018 due in part to the fact that I had already attended over the summer. When I was given the opportunity to attend the same training with members of my school that I had been developing varying levels of trust and comfort with, I was able to gain insight into the nature of approaching conversations about race with colleagues. However, I was hesitant to re-enter such an emotional experience, especially in front of a white staff member, an

Asian staff member and my white principal I had just met a few months prior. But my self-belief in representation kept me from turning down the opportunity. I wanted Black educators in my building, and in my district, to continue to have their voice heard in the conversation. Not attending would feel like a professional dismissal of the importance of courageous conversations.

Ayanna, why did you choose to attend this conference alone, rather than with people from your learning community at Knowles?

Ayanna: My initial wish was to attend with some of my Knowles colleagues, but that fell through due to scheduling. I was hesitant to attend with some of the Knowles teachers I support because, despite having positional power as a result of my employment, there are places and spaces in my work where I see and directly experience the effects of white privilege.

I chose, rightly or wrongly, to not muddy my current relationships with teachers I appreciate, respect, and have mentored with discussions about race that I wasn't sure I was ready to have with them. It's not that I didn't want to work up to those conversations, but I didn't want to be thrown into those conversations until I was ready to have them. For these reasons, I chose to attend the Beyond Diversity seminar held at the National Summit for Courageous Conversations, instead of attending the seminar held at the Knowles Summer Meeting.

Each of us decided to attend this seminar to talk about race. What happened? How did we experience it? What resonated with us most during the seminar?

Dwaina: I will try to contrast my experiences in the two spaces. In my Knowles training session, there were mostly white people in attendance, including two white Program Officers for Teacher Development from the Knowles Teacher Initiative. In the fall district training, I was struck by how much more racially diverse the attendees were, with the room composed of approximately 40% Black, 50% White and 10% Latinx or Asian participants. Teachers, assistant principals, and principals from across my district were in attendance and seated at assigned tables by school.

Based on my experience in the mostly white space and the more racially diverse space, I have come to understand that either space can feel isolating or empowering. In the Knowles training, reading my reflection of day one to the

room gave me the opportunity to open up in a way that felt productive in a mostly white space. I had everyone's undivided attention to share my discomfort and emotional response to the activities in which we had engaged. On the other hand, I had a less empowering experience with my affinity group during the district training. When asked to share their day one reflections, the first 13 people to do so were African-American, 10 of whom were women. Only when our presenter intentionally opened up the floor to different opinions did a few white educators feel willing to share.

Sharing the training at Knowles with a room full of educators that I know personally and professionally created some comfort but also some discomfort. I had never discussed race in depth with any of the Fellows in my cohort, and I worried that making any experiences or perspectives public while also listening to those of my Knowles colleagues might change the assumed safety I felt as a Knowles Fellow in our professional community. In attending the district-sponsored workshop, I expected to be seated with people I did not know and prepared to engage in similarly difficult conversations as I did within the Knowles community, and I didn't want to feel self-conscious about speaking my truth. I was prepared to be vulnerable and honest with a group of strangers, but having my coworkers and principal in attendance completely changed the dynamic for me.

With the Knowles community, I found comfort in not having to think about how I was presenting myself or my opinions during any of the share-outs. There was an exercise in which we looked at racialized images with a partner and talked non-stop about whatever came to mind immediately after viewing them. A side-by-side juxtaposition of media reports about Trayvon Martin and the Dark Knight movie theater murderer, with very differing levels of aggressiveness in the headlines, left me silent and weeping as I immediately thought about how easily my brother's picture could be up there instead of Trayvon's. My partner instantly recognized my emotional state and sat in silence with me as I cried. Our shared Knowles norms allowed my partner to know when to break the rules of the seminar to be responsive to my needs. I was very aware that I was still getting to know my staff during the district training, and I certainly didn't think engaging in conversations about race was going to make the relationship building any easier. Tearing up in front of strangers might not be as wholeheartedly understood.

However, there was discomfort in my Knowles experience in the form of not wanting to offend or upset anyone with whom I have a good relationship. The

privilege questionnaire in the training asks each respondent to rank their ability to be around people of their own race, to live where they want to live, to shop where want to shop without harassment, and their confidence in being treated well as a result of their race. Essentially it asks you to rank how often you experience racially-charged moments. We completed this questionnaire at the end of day one, and my score was the lowest in the room.

I had noticed from the beginning of the Knowles seminar that I was one of the people, if not the person, with the darkest complexion in the room. All eyes were on me as we lined up and held our numbers against our chest, and I was acutely aware of how alone I was. Tears welled up in my eyes as I reflected on my surroundings, the people who knew me well but now only saw a painfully low single digit number held up against my chest, a stark contrast to their own high two- or three-digits. As our presenter played the closing music of the day, I was so embarrassed by my place in the line that I glued my eyes on the carpet and cried. I was left wondering if all the respect I worked so hard to gain with my Knowles colleagues was discarded now that they were faced with my societal standing.

The end of the privilege line was much a different experience with my district colleagues, and I was nowhere nearly as spotlighted. Clustered at the end of the line, we had to shift to make room for every additional teacher with a low score. We looked each other in the eye as if to say, “I know why you’re here, and it has nothing to do with who you are as a person.” In fact, there were so many people of color at the end of the line that we didn’t have enough room to line up and became a blob. When Chance the Rapper’s “Blessings (Reprise)” played over the speakers, many educators from my section couldn’t help but bob and sway in reflective excitement. As we filed out of day one, I felt as if I had found my community and we were all standing together in solidarity of the cards we had been dealt due to our race.

Ayanna: When I first got to the meeting that took place at a larger public conference, there were many people in the room. From what I could see, there were White, Black, Asian, and Latinx people, over a hundred people, all sitting at different tables. I wasn’t sure what I had in common with the Black people there aside from race. In this racially diverse setting, we also completed the privilege questionnaire Dwaina describes, and I found some people who had similar experiences or rated themselves the same as me.

Initially, upon a visual inspection, I wasn't quite sure who was similar to me in terms of how they walk the world. I think it's a known fact but one that, even for me, at times goes unarticulated: people of color have different lived experiences based on a range of factors even when they share the same race. That is the complexity of the Black experience—it's so different, so multifaceted, even if our skin is the same shade of brown. From what I remember, the people at my table had almond brown, chestnut brown, and even deep brown skin. I sat down at this table with all these people that ranked their privilege with respect to their racial identity as zero and I felt like I was among friends.

It surprised me that this shared ranking of experience caused me to feel a kinship with people that I'd just met and whom I may never talk to or see again. It was weird that, just on this point of commonality or community or similarity, I felt a togetherness that I don't often feel outside of my faith-based meetings or gatherings of family and friends. I felt like I was sitting with people who understood that even with my terminal degree, my middle class income, my history of living in houses owned by my parents, my own car, my history of national and international travel, my financial acumen and solvency—even with all this, I still didn't have privilege with respect to my race. It felt like they understood that space of uncertainty and sometimes fear that just has to do with being Black.

And even as I work to unpack my experience as a Black person, the facilitators reminded me that my experience in this world is and has always been gendered. And speaking for myself, while I may believe that I can separate my experiences as a Black person from my experiences as a woman, it is quite difficult even as a philosophical endeavor because I've only walked the world as a Black girl or woman. In that moment I thought of the fear I felt for my husband's safety. This fear manifested right around the time there was a surge of news and media around the potential negative impact of police interaction with Black men. At this table with these people who shared my racial privilege ranking there was understanding. These people understood my fear because they don't experience privilege because of their race. So while I think diversity is necessary and beneficial because it brings multiple perspectives, broadens our viewpoints, and allows us to be more effective in our work, the thing that I miss when I'm the one point of racial diversity in a space is having more people that share and deeply understand my common experience.

Awareness of commonalities brings community where there wasn't community before.

For me, racial diversity allows for community in spaces where community might not have traditionally existed for me. At times, I feel like race is such a barrier to learning about shared experience because of the ways that white privilege pervades our society. At no point can I be certain that a white counterpart agrees that white privilege exists or is aware of the ways that it may impact me or people that look like me. And, even in this space of uncertainty, I know there might be a way to build community. A white person may not share my lived experience, but they may actually be a point of community around things that seem racially isolating to me. I just won't know if I don't reach out to learn about their experiences and share mine, similar to the ways I did during this conference.

What comes next? How has this experience impacted us? What actions have we taken since then to continue learning or growing in this area?

Dwaina: My first experience of the two days of professional development—the one organized by the Knowles Teacher Initiative—was emotionally draining and thought-provoking, to say the least. My second experience, with other teachers in my local context, definitely left me more frustrated than vulnerable. Both times, however, I saw extreme value in attending and participating, and I was pleasantly surprised to see how many white Knowles Fellows had taken the time and effort to be there for the conversation.

The Beyond Diversity workshop is not just a vehicle for helping white people talk about race. I engaged in activities that helped me reflect on my own biases and think about the ways I avoid talking about race and being courageous on a daily basis. Our in-depth conversation around “whiteness” opened my eyes up to the practices that I enforce and the implicit societal pressures that cause me to do so. Our facilitator's anecdote on lateness made me reflect on the ways I react to timeliness in my classroom and what norms I enforce by doing so. While being on

time may be directly linked to 'white culture,' which is neither negative or positive, our reactions to varying states of timeliness are based on how our culture values that timeliness.

In thinking about courageous conversations, I have thought primarily about the whiteness behind "assume best intentions," which is actually a norm that my Knowles cohort established at our first meeting in 2014. Originally, I thought the norm was warranted as we were getting to know each other and were coming from vastly different contexts and backgrounds. Our Beyond Diversity presenter shared the sentiment: racism doesn't only come from bad people. I internalized this as: racism can come from anyone, and being able to call it out is a way of assuming best intentions even if it doesn't feel like it in the moment. Adhering to white fragility, the practice of tiptoeing around what we know is wrong or trying not to push too hard, has constantly been on my mind. In assuming best intentions, are we allowing for those who struggle with their own white fragility to flourish under its protective umbrella? Calling out a racist idea or thought or sentiment is assuming best intentions, because you are creating a space where conversations around it can still happen.

I am a Black educator, and I have navigated predominately white spaces all of my life. As a result, I am constantly evaluating what aspects of whiteness I have adopted and, even more interestingly, what aspects I push onto my students. I am grateful for the opportunity to have this formalized conversation around race in two different settings. I am hoping to make courageous conversations a defining characteristic of my teaching practice both in how I teach my students and how I interact with colleagues. If having courageous conversations (or anything aligned with this goal) is something your school or organization wants to deeply engage in, determining if everyone should engage in the training together or separately is integral to how it might be perceived and, down the road, enacted.

Ayanna: For years, I have thought about the benefits of diversity. But more recently I have been thinking about the benefits of inclusion. My experiences as an African American woman have led me to believe that diversity is really the thing that brings color to a space—that brings life to a space. I've always thought about diversity as something that builds empathy for people outside of a racial or gender group. I thought about it as something that builds awareness of the complexity within a racial group but I never really thought about it as something that brings community to people within that racial group.

When I went to the Courageous Conversations Beyond Diversity Training[®], I felt a sense of camaraderie and a sense of community that I had not really attributed to diversity or inclusion. Since then, I have a stronger belief in having people share about themselves and be vulnerable with each other. When I am with other people that understand my lived experiences, even if our experiences are not exactly the same, I feel more able to share about myself and in some ways that sense of community helps me feel less alone in my perspective or experience.

In this America where there is so much hatred that's being spewed from all kinds of megaphones and so much anticipation of what the next hate crime is going to be against people of color, or people who are religious minorities, or people who are disabled, or people who are gay or pansexual, or people who are transgender or genderfluid, I think awareness of commonalities brings community where there wasn't community before. It creates a portrait of togetherness, confrontation, and respect from which we can continue to build.

Download Article

Dwaina Sookhoo is a first generation Haitian-American who identifies as Black. She is a 2014 Knowles Teaching Fellow and 2015 Math for America Early Career Fellow who is currently in her sixth year of teaching mathematics at the Academy for Young Writers in East New York, NY. Dwaina is very involved in work around equity, including participating in Critically Conscious Educators Rising at New York University and developing complex instruction practices in her classroom. Find her on Twitter at [@mathapprentice_](#) or contact her via email at dwaina.sookhoo@knowlesteachers.org.

Ayanna Perry is a first-generation Trinidadian-American who identifies as African American. She joined the Knowles Teacher Initiative in January 2014 and currently works as an Associate Director of the Teaching Fellows Program. Ayanna has been working to increase her knowledge and understanding of equity issues for more than a decade and is committed to increasing the capacity of those around her to be catalysts for real change. Find her on Twitter at [@AyannaPerry2](#) or contact her via email at ayanna.perry@knowlesteachers.org.