

Case Study 6.4: (Racist) Terms of Endearment

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.

Ms. Lawson was glad to be teaching math at Greenstown High School, a racially and economically diverse school. She previously had worked at predominantly white schools with very few students receiving free or reduced-price lunches. After losing her job due to budget cuts, and after taking a course on diversity while earning her Masters of Arts in Teaching degree, she accepted a job teaching in a more diverse environment. She arrived at Greenstown feeling eager and prepared to take instructional advantage of the diversity.

Several weeks into her first year at Greenstown, Ms. Lawson was happy about how well she had adjusted to her new environment. She had taken several measures early in the school year to demonstrate her commitment to racial equity and it seemed as though students were responding positively. She was especially pleased when she saw students of color reading the Diversity in Mathematics posters she hung around the room, highlighting historically important mathematicians of color from around the world. They complained a little—predictably, she thought—in all of her classes on the second day of school when, responding to the racially segregated seating patterns she noticed the first day of class, she assigned seats. She never mentioned her reason for assigning seats, though, and students were accustomed to seat assignments from some of their other classes, so that tension passed quickly. All in all, things were progressing smoothly.

One afternoon around mid-October, as she gathered her materials for her fifth-period class and students made their way into her classroom, Ms. Lawson overheard one of her students use the n-word. Understanding how inflammatory the n-word was, her immediate reaction was concern that there would be a fight in her classroom. So when she looked up from her desk and peered toward the back of her classroom, where she was sure the word came from, she was surprised to see Reggie, an African American student, Adolfo, a Latino student, and Anthony, a white student, all laughing together.

“Who said that”? Ms. Lawson asked as she stood and walked toward the back of the room.

“Said what?” Adolfo asked, still laughing.

“You all know exactly what I mean. The n-word,” Ms. Lawson replied. Nobody responded, but Adolfo and Reggie both glanced at Anthony.

“Anthony?” Ms. Lawson prodded.

"I didn't say the n-word, I said *n-i-g-g-a, nigga*," he explained. Ms. Lawson was unsettled by how confident Anthony sounded, as though he really did not believe he had done anything wrong. "I always call Reggie that. He's cool with it. It's a term of endearment."

Keisha, an African American young woman who had overheard their conversation, interjected, "That's no term of endearment, you idiot. It's racist. And you're lucky you're not getting a beat down right now for saying it."

"Enough of that," Ms. Lawson said, glaring at Keisha. "There won't be any threats of violence in this classroom. Sit down and let me take care of this."

Unsure what to say next, Ms. Lawson turned toward Reggie. He no longer was laughing and, she thought, was beginning to look uncomfortable. "Is that true, Reggie, that he calls you that all the time and you're fine with it?"

"It's no big deal," Anthony explained. "Right, Reg?" he asked playfully, nudging Reggie with his elbow.

"Reggie can speak for himself," Ms. Lawson said, then looked back at Reggie, who was looking even more uncomfortable. Just then, the start of class bell rang and Ms. Lawson looked up to see everybody in the room staring at her and Reggie. Feeling that, whatever he really felt about Anthony's use of the n-word, Reggie was even more uneasy with the spotlight she was shining on him in that moment, she decided to drop the issue and commence with teaching class.

As she walked back toward her desk, she said with a half-defeated sigh, "Please remember, everyone, that one of our community norms is *respect*. I don't care you how pronounce it or what you mean by it, there is no room in this classroom for that kind of language."

She knew, even as she was making that statement, that she did not handle the situation well. She also knew she needed to figure out a way to respond more thoughtfully in case it happened again.