

Discussion Questions

1. The cover of *Teaching While Black* shows Lewis holding two identical dolls, one White, one Black. Considering the series of experiments—known colloquially as the “doll tests”—that were conducted in the 1940s by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark and were used to assess children’s racial perceptions, how would you interpret the way in which Lewis is holding the dolls? What is she suggesting?
2. The Preface begins with a traumatic episode in Lewis’s childhood. Why do you think she began her book in this way? How do you think it informed her teacher journey?
3. Lewis explains the uncanny sensation of “double consciousness”—as coined by W. E. B. Du Bois—that Black people experience on a daily basis. When might there be moments in your school building when Black teachers or students are consumed by this feeling, and why?
4. In her Preface, Lewis defines teacher support for law enforcement as a “conflict of interest.” Why do you think she feels this way, and do you agree or disagree?
5. Ms. Lewis has chosen song titles for all of her chapters. What do these titles symbolize both individually from chapter to chapter and collectively? Why do you think she decided to use music to describe her feelings?
6. Lewis commends the decision by the New York City Teaching Fellows Program to provide fellows the outlet to discuss sensitive issues like race honestly among one another. Is there a space for these conversations within your school building? Have they been helpful? What rules and protocols could be set up to improve upon or create a safe space for these conversations?

7. Lewis provides lots of personal information in her memoir, including her relationship with Trey. Why do you think she chose to include this particular relationship in a memoir about teaching? What does this relationship signify? Whom does Trey represent?
8. In Chapter 2, Lewis introduces her readers to two students: one whom she made assumptions about because of a disability and one whose behavior was directly connected to feelings of inadequacy due to her skin tone. How does your school/classroom perpetuate or combat such feelings that are due to societal racism, colorism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other -isms? How can your school be more culturally responsive and inclusive for all?
9. In Chapter 3, Lewis infers that Principal Singletary's often unyielding disposition may be due to the extra stress imposed on her because of her gender and race. What is your awareness of and experience with intersectionality within a school setting? How does intersectionality play an even more profound role of oppression against Black female administrators, teachers, or students in your school? What could you do to combat it?
10. In college, Lewis meets Dr. Naison, a White professor and ally in the struggle for Black empowerment. What is the role of an ally? How can you demonstrate "allyship" in your school setting?
11. Lewis shares many instances in which she fosters partnerships between school and community (Fordham University's Bronx African-American History Project; neighborhood schoolyard jam; senior center inter-visitation initiative). Based on the reading, what is the benefit of partnerships between school and community for both stakeholders? What partnerships can you foster in your school community?
12. Over the course of the memoir, Lewis highlights her most memorable teachers. In some cases, they were remembered for unfortunate reasons such as insensitivity and unfairness. In others, she remembers them for being passionate, inspirational, loving, and relatable. Who were your most memorable teachers, and what made them memorable? How will your students remember you, and why?

13. In her memoir, Lewis describes both the joys and pains of working in close proximity with other educators (e.g., Ms. Lake, her class's paraprofessional; Ms. Giles, the principal; and Casey, Lewis's co-teacher). What experiences have you had with these close work relationships? How much of a role have race, gender, and/or class played in the success or failure of those relationships?
14. In her memoir, Lewis explains how often her background has been beneficial toward her ability to connect with her students. What examples can you identify in this book where being a Black woman who came from poverty has been helpful toward her connecting with her students? How have race, gender, and/or class had an impact on your relationships with your students?
15. Despite its not ever being a part of her curriculum, Lewis teaches through the lens of the oppressed and excluded (e.g., Taino natives and southern Black migrants to the Bronx) and intentionally incorporates and exposes her students to different facets of African and African-American history and culture into her lessons and assemblies (e.g., African dance and percussion, step dance, slave history and mentality, rap multiplication songs, Malcolm X and the unknown variable, LGBTQ Ball culture). Why is this necessary? What curriculum could be revised in your classroom? How can you be more inclusive?
16. Lewis describes many—mostly positive—encounters and relationships with parents in her book. What went wrong with Ms. Santos? How do you believe she handled this relationship? What seemed to be the biggest obstacle in this relationship? What could she have done to improve it?
17. Lewis never confronts Casey about her feelings surrounding his behavior. Why do you think she chose to handle that situation the way she did? Do you think this decision was appropriate? Fair? How would you have handled that situation? Have you been or experienced a “Casey” figure? Is a “Casey” capable of change? How so?
18. Lewis experiences racial trauma in the form of microaggressions and overt harassment but doesn't seek justice because she feels powerless. How prevalent is each form in your own school?

building? How could something like this be prevented? Who's responsible?

19. In the Epilogue, Lewis introduces us to a new man, now husband, Omar, and a new endeavor—opening her own school. What do Omar and her plans for her own school symbolize? How is he, and the new school plan, different from the public school system and Trey?
20. After reading *Teaching While Black: A New Voice on Race and Education in New York City*, what new commitments can you make to the students and teachers of color in your city?