Now that private schools know what it’s like ‘being black’ on their campuses, will they do what they ask of their students — learn and do better?

By Theresa Vargas

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Taaaj Davis is a now a teacher. But not long ago, he was a student, sitting in a class at the Potomac School in Virginia, wondering how a course on “marginalized voices” could fail to include any discussion about what it meant to be black in America.

The only book that addressed race or ethnicity, he recalls, was the “The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven.”

“We did not read anything on anti-black racism,” he says. “It felt like just a big myth in that class.”

It felt like a conversation that, if not purposely, then too easily, was pushed aside. And by then, Davis says, as a black student at the majority-white private school, he had already seen too much pushed aside when it came to race.
“There are a lot of people I graduated with,” he says, “who I have had very candid conversations with, who don’t believe we are living in a world where racism still exists.”

Davis is no longer that teenager bound by the lesson plans of others. He is a 23-year-old history teacher with his own students at another private school in Virginia. But he found himself pulled back into those high school years this week after clicking on an Instagram page that was created as a “safe space” for former and current students to anonymously share their experiences of “being black” at Potomac.

He scrolled through the page on a recent day, and then started typing. He could have chosen to write about several experiences, but he settled on that memory of feeling marginalized in a class about marginalization.
His story now sits among the dozens that have popped up on the page since it was created a few days ago.

Potomac is not the only private school that has seen black students and graduates speak out lately — far from it. People have taken to social media to write about “being black” at educational institutions across the country. There is a page dedicated to Sidwell Friends School, where the Obamas sent their children, and there is one dedicated to Georgetown Day School.

The stories that have emerged feel intimate. Some detail specific incidents in which black students were made to feel different. Others address broader cultural issues.

These three appear on the Georgetown Day page:

An ultra wealthy white kid that attended GDS had me and a bunch of other kids at his house. When my dad came to pick me up he responded to the door and acted as if my black Dad was the help.
Junior year my friends and I (mainly black students) decided to use the art studio to make a clothing line. Within two days of printing T-shirts a teacher came up to us while we were making shirts and asked us “are you making gang related shirts ... for MS13.”

White dudes in my class would constantly say the n-word and whenever they were called out on it they would say “but you know I’m not racist.”

There will be people, of course, who read through the posts and feel the urge to dismiss them as false or place them in a context that explains away the racism in them. Many of the stories reflect microaggressions that may or may not have been committed intentionally.

But taken together, they reveal a problem that is far from micro. They show that even at schools with plenty of resources and thoughtful mission statements, educational equity is not yet a reality for many students of color. In their posts, black students describe feeling isolated, stereotyped and diminished in ways that, in some cases, stayed with them long after they graduated.
Many people of color, whether they attended public or private schools, will see in those remembrances moments that feel too familiar. They will find in them reminders of times when the people who were supposed to build them up made them feel small.

Those moments are sometimes difficult to describe because they can be subtle. They can even feel silly to mention. (At least one student’s post begins, “This may sound trivial.”) But they tend to reveal themselves in the way they leave a person feeling long after they have passed. I have forgotten the layouts of most of my childhood classes, but I remember exactly where I was sitting when a teacher told my classmates that I won an essay writing contest, and then whispered in my ear that my mother must have written it.

Those “being black” posts can be seen as criticism, or they can be taken as gifts that offer important insight at a time when the nation is in the middle of a moment of racial reckoning. How schools respond will reveal how they view them. They can ignore them. They can explain them away. Or they can use them to do what they ask of their own students — learn and do better.
That a “being black” page exists for Potomac is telling, not because the school has a negative reputation, but because it doesn’t. The school lists among its philosophy and practices an aim to “foster a diverse, inclusive learning community where all voices and viewpoints are valued.” In the past few days, I have spoken on and off the record to black parents, black students and black former teachers at the school, and they all describe an atmosphere that values kindness.

They also say they don’t doubt any of the stories that students and graduates are now sharing on that Instagram page.

“I was on my way to class one day with a white classmate who was also in the same class as me,” reads one. “While we were walking he ‘accidentally’ called me the n word. When I confronted him about this — He reasoned that it ‘slipped out’ because the kids on his predominantly WHITE sports team use it all the time.”

“As someone lost their wallet and immediately turned towards me and asked if I stole it,” reads another. “I said, ‘no.’ A day later I was questioned by his other friends if I stole his wallet. They insisted I stole his wallet. He later found it on a faculty’s desk.”

“As a dark skinned Black woman, I’ve never felt more alienated in my blackness than when I was at Potomac,” reads yet another. “The amount of self-hatred I had to...
“When I resigned, I told them that they don’t deserve the black teachers that remain there, and honestly, I should have added that they don’t deserve the black students also,” he says. “My argument is, if you’re not going to give these students what they need, don’t invite them in with your words and show them they don’t belong with your actions.”

He believes that students should not have felt the need to start a social media campaign to get the attention of school leaders. But now that they have, he hopes it causes them to reexamine the school’s environment.

One comment on the “being black” page that stood out to him was about how the school’s community had rallied to save a tree nicknamed “Bruce the Spruce.”
“They acted as if it was a human right’s issue and actually had the entire community rally behind that tree,” read the post. “If only the community could see the humanity of Black people like they did in that tree.”

In Davis’s post, he referenced a rallying cry for unity that is often heard at the school: “Where we go one, we go all.” Only he wrote, “Where we went one, we did not go all.”

He graduated from the school five years ago, but he is still personally invested in what happens there. His younger sister and brother remain enrolled.

As a student, Davis lamented the absence of black voices in a class where he thought they belonged. As a teacher, he has been glad to see them emerge across the country. The school where he works is the subject of one “being black” page.

“These voices matter,” he says. “It’s important that these stories are coming out, and I hope it continues.”

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