



While most professionals would tell you to keep your emotions out of the workplace, Riley Drake encourages the exact opposite.

Currently a Ph.D. student in education with an emphasis in social and cultural studies, Riley focuses on the way that feelings about race can affect students and teachers.

“I believe that there are a large number of white teachers who have the best of intentions but aren’t aware of how they actually feel about their students and families of color because they haven’t explored those emotions,” Riley said. “When I think about the monumental task that is facing educators, I think the only solution is for us to get uncomfortable.”

Before coming to Iowa State, Riley worked as an elementary school counselor where she recognized the gap in opportunities offered to students of color. She believes that unexplored white emotions towards race are contributing to the gap and limiting opportunities for students of color in classrooms across the country.

“We’ve been conceiving of the gap in the wrong way,” Riley said. “It is an issue of the system, and the system was built on whiteness. We’ve been looking for solutions in the wrong places. We’ve been ignoring emotionality.”

Riley worked as a school counselor for six-and-a-half years and realized that “solutions” are impossible without examining the entire system as well as ourselves. Riley had multiple connections with professors at Iowa State and had heard about the social and cultural studies of education emphasis. She decided it was a great fit for her, and it would allow her to help influence and transform teachers’ understandings about themselves and their role(s).

“The program is robust with brilliant faculty who are committed to justice and advocacy in critical education and was literally at my back door,” she said.

Riley is currently in the first year of her Ph.D. and splits her time between researching racial literacy and teaching a social foundations course. Her experiences at Iowa State have shown her that she made the right choice going back to school.

“My classes have encouraged me to think beyond the borders but also within the self,” Riley said. “The theme that I have noted in each class I’ve taken thus far is a focus on looking beyond, while also looking inside. Who are we? What are we feeling? What have we become? Who do we want to be? Let’s talk about that.”