

Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories about Bias and Injustice



Loavesofbread

When there are national news stories that involve incidents of bias and injustice, young people want to be part of the conversation. Even at a young age, they hear adults talking about what's happening, read about the story on social media or learn about it through television. Rather than protect children and youth from what's going on in the world, there are age-appropriate and constructive ways to engage them in understanding the situation. Teachers often feel a responsibility to address the issue in some way, whether they do it with a short conversation, an interactive lesson or a unit lasting days or weeks.

Below are suggestions, strategies and resources to help make those discussions rich and productive for students. The suggestions below build in opportunities for students to read, write, research, speak, listen and understand vocabulary, addressing ELA common core standards. In addition, use our [Current Events Classroom](#) to find K-12 lessons on timely topics of the day that analyze them through an anti-bias and social justice lens.

Create Safety

At the beginning of the school year, create an [anti-bias learning environment](#), one that is safe for all students to share, contribute and learn. Develop classroom guidelines that involve the students in the process rather than just handing them a list of rules. The guidelines should address listening, confidentiality, put-downs and how to deal with bias and stereotyping. Work on creating a climate where students feel comfortable making mistakes and asking questions of all kinds. Before delving into a controversial or sensitive topic, revisit the classroom guidelines. Always consider your students' identities and their life experiences. For example, if you are discussing a racial incident and you have only a few students of color in your class, consider how to make it safe for those students to discuss the issues, using the [Guidelines for Achieving Bias-Free Communication](#).

Express Feelings

Being able to identify and express feelings is an important skill all children should learn. When there is a controversial news story, young people will often respond emotionally and will need to get those feelings out. Whether it's anger over a racial incident or sadness about a bias-related school shooting, it is important that students are given the time and space to explore their feelings in a safe and inclusive environment. Make sure students know how to respectfully listen to other students express their feelings, whether or not those feelings resonate with their own. Expand your students' feelings vocabulary beyond "mad, glad and sad" so they have a more sophisticated and nuanced way to

understand how something feels--be it rage, frustration, sadness or hopefulness. Model this by being open with your own feelings and teach students to distinguish between their thoughts and their feelings, opinions and facts, all of which are valuable. Give students the opportunity to express their feelings verbally or in writing and respect students' right to pass if they're not ready.

Generate Questions

Students often have questions about what they hear in the news. Find out what they already know—some of which may be true, some may be opinion and some purported facts may actually not be true at all. It is important that students understand that asking questions is not a finite process where questions are asked, answered and then the task is complete. Convey the concept that questions bring new information and new information brings more and deeper questions. In addition to brainstorming their questions, have them think through the best way to find the answers and to generate new ones. Help improve their ability to discern different kinds of questions. They may start with the basics of “who, what, where, why and when” and then move into more sophisticated critical thinking and essential questions that tap into intent, perspective and motivation. Use the KWL (Know, Want to Know, Learned) process, shown in this lesson about [Cesar Chavez](#), to help students explore what they know and want to know, continually asking new questions.

Share Facts

In our society with a 24/7 news cycle, as well as news coming to us in many different formats, it is sometimes difficult to sort through all of the information and understand the basic facts of a news story. In your initial conversations with students, find out what students know and clarify misunderstandings and misinformation. Give them the tools and skills they need to find out what actually happened and what is unknown in the situation. In addition, help them understand [bias-related vocabulary](#) and—depending on their grade level—make sure they understand the distinction between prejudice and discrimination,

equality and equity, target and aggressor and identify the various forms of prejudice and oppression (the “isms”).

Learn More

Once they have generated their initial questions about the basic facts, inspire them to dig deeper in order to learn more. Using their questions and their interests as a foundation, encourage them to do further investigation about the current event as well as the history and background leading up to it. For example, if you are discussing the [Washington Redskins' name controversy](#), have students learn about the history of slurs targeting Native Americans and other forms of bias and discrimination directed towards them. Help students understand that there are a variety of techniques and ways to research their topic to learn more: talking to friends and family, reading news articles and blogs, watching videos, talking online with others, reading books for background information, searching the Internet and learning how to distinguish legitimate from questionable sources.

Complicate Thinking

Students often have strong feelings and opinions about topics in the news. Not only should they reflect upon and express those opinions, their thinking should be complicated by hearing about and considering different points of view. Provide young people with editorials to read, surveys to sort through and a chance to hear their classmates' viewpoints. When they read editorials and news articles, help students determine the perspective of the writer and consider their motivation. Give them practice in building their case by assigning argumentative essays, persuasive letters and opinion pieces. Engage students in discussions with each other of various kinds and configurations: debate, dialogue, pairs, small groups, fishbowls and different talking partners. Reflecting on their own opinions and learning about the perspective of others helps them build strength and conviction and ultimately inspire action.

Teach Technology

Young people receive news in a variety of ways, including social media such as Snapchat and Instagram. When there are stories about injustice or tragic events, students may feel inundated by different reports, stories and action steps. To alleviate feelings of helplessness and anxiety, at the beginning of the year teach about [digital citizenship](#). Help students become media literate by teaching [media literacy](#). The 24-hour news cycle on TV, social media and online can present different narratives, which can be confusing. Work with young people to build their skills in identifying false information and websites. Additionally, teach them how to assess the credibility of authors and the multiple perspectives they will find online. Finally, remind students about online safety. Young people should not share personal information online, meet anyone online in person and should always tell an adult if something seems wrong.

Take Action

While it's important to talk about issues in the news with young people, it can also feel disempowering and hopeless, especially around large complicated stories of injustice. You don't want students to feel like there's nothing they can do about it. Taking action—no matter how small or large an act—can feel gratifying and powerful. After students have learned more about the issue, reflected on their own opinions and explored their thoughts and feelings about it, it is time to do something. [Action](#) can take many forms and it's helpful to broaden students' concept of what is possible. This can include: teaching others and raising awareness, organizing a school or community forum, getting involved in protests, demonstrations and other forms of activism; writing letters to politicians or other stakeholders, creating social media campaigns to spread their message, learning about other youth activists like [Malala Yousafzai](#), raising money, starting a petition, doing a survey, participating in community service and much more. All of these activities can be done individually, as a class or the whole school can get involved.

Helping young people understand and think critically about something important happening in the world and then watching them take action is one of the great joys of being a teacher.