

Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism



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As a society, public discussions about race and racism have increased in volume and intensity. Educators feel a sense of responsibility to bring these topics into their classrooms—because young people want to be part of the conversation and should be. If handled effectively, these discussions provide opportunities for timely learning. From police-involved deaths of Black and Latinx men to everyday racism to Confederate flag controversy with sports figures and celebrities getting involved in the conversation, there is a lot to grapple with and discuss.

Educators sometimes feel hesitant to raise these topics because it may be uncomfortable, strong emotions can emerge and teachers may feel they don't have

enough information or background to teach the topic well. Below are suggestions and strategies for having classroom conversations with young people about race and racism. Prior to these discussions and throughout the process, teachers will benefit from doing their own self-reflective personal work around race and racism—whether this takes the form of [professional development](#), reading and reflection, conversations with colleagues and others—to be aware of their own triggers and sensitivities and be willing to not only be uncomfortable but be a learner alongside their students.

1. Set Up a Safe and Respectful Classroom Environment.

In order to set the stage and tone for productive discussions around race and racism, make sure that you develop ground rules as a class that promote safety, inclusiveness and respect. Help to establish trust in the classroom by doing group building activities and find ways for students to talk and get to know each other in different configurations (pairings, small groups, whole class, etc.). Teach and encourage students to disagree respectfully, ask questions, share their own feelings and listen to the feelings of others. Use ADL's [Creating An Anti-Bias Learning Environment](#) for additional strategies.

2. Consider the Racial Composition of Your Classroom.

Be mindful of the racial composition of your classroom and consider who is in the room when engaging in conversations about race. You might think differently about how to approach this topic if there are few, many or no students of color. If you don't have any students of color in your classroom, find ways to include other voices by using social media, videos, books and articles or organize a [Skype panel discussion](#) to get diverse voices in the room. At the same time, do not assume students of color want to share their experiences or are knowledgeable and skilled in talking about race. Further, do not place those students in the position of being the “authority” or main possessor of knowledge about race.

3. Define Terms.

It is important to spend some time defining terms. Students need to be aware of the terminology around race and bias, including the distinctions between certain words. For example, there is a difference between prejudice, bias, stereotypes and discrimination and knowing what makes each of those unique is an important foundation for having constructive conversations on race and racism. Similarly, it is critical to understand how [implicit bias](#) manifests itself differently than overt forms of discrimination which were more prevalent in the past. [Microaggressions](#) is another term that is used frequently but not necessarily widely understood. Bias and prejudice displayed in interpersonal interactions is different than those which are structural in nature. Use ADL's [glossary of education terms](#) to help guide your work with students to understand the language of bias.

4. Connect the Past to the Present.

Racism in the United States has a long and appalling past. From slavery to Jim Crow and segregation, there is a lot to teach about race and racism. When you discuss [current incidents](#) of racism and injustice, it is often helpful to ground the discussions in an historical context. Where relevant, provide historical background to connect the past to the present. For example, the murder of nine parishioners at a Charleston church necessitates a history lesson about the Confederate flag because the perpetrator was associated with [white supremacy](#) ideology and the Confederate flag; a public conversation about the flag's meaning and historical connection to slavery took place following the incident. This can provide a positive motivation for reluctant history students to learn about the past as a way to more deeply understand the present.

5. Understand Perspective.

Perspective is a person's individual way of regarding situations and facts, their point of view. Help students understand that one's perspective is shaped by their own racial background as well as other aspects of their identity, their peers, family, life experiences, what they are exposed to in the media, etc. Understanding that people have different perspectives on incidents and situations is helpful in

deconstructing that one person may see the same situation differently than someone else. This is especially important to understand with [racial situations](#) because white people and people of color may not see the situation in the same light; within racial groups there will also be diversity of perspective.

6. Think Critically About the Media.

Encourage students to be critical viewers of media, including print, television, internet, video, social media and other digital spaces. Assist them in analyzing media portrayals of racial incidents in the news by thinking critically about what they read, hear and see. This includes exposing them to a wide variety of sources that illustrate different perspectives and opinions along the political spectrum. In addition to traditional media, blogs and social media are good sources for this. Encourage students to ask questions that go beyond the surface: *How do I know what I know? What is the perspective of the person writing or speaking? What influences their point of view? What are their biases? What don't I see?* Use video clips and excerpts in class to show students how media can perpetuate stereotypes and racism. In addition, reflect on the implicit messages you convey to young people about race by what's on the walls and bulletin boards in your classroom, the [books](#) you assign and read together, the people and holidays that you talk about.

7. Talk About Structural Racism and White Privilege.

White privilege, the unearned and often unrecognized advantages, benefits or rights conferred upon people in a dominant group, is an important piece of the puzzle when talking about racism. The flip side of white privilege is structural racism which oppresses and marginalizes people of color through societal institutions like education, law enforcement, voting, employment and other systems. Reflecting upon what [white privilege](#) means helps students understand how some people receive unearned privilege while others are disadvantaged based simply by their race. Addressing white privilege and structural racism are advanced skills. Therefore, it is critical that teachers have done their own

individual reflection and possess the background and skills to discuss it with students so it doesn't backfire or lead to defensiveness. Think carefully about your comfort with the topic and do not address it unless you feel comfortable and skilled in doing so. Consider using a new MTV documentary film called *White People* to facilitate the discussion.

8. Encourage Empathy.

Compassion and empathy go a long way in helping students understand race and racism. Provide opportunities for students to hear the thoughts and feelings of people most impacted by racism through in-person conversations/interviews, narratives, videos, photos and recordings. Have students reflect on these experiences and focus especially on the feelings of others. In this way, you help students be sensitive to what people are going through in these situations and promote empathy. Allow and help students express their range of emotions (anger, rage, frustration, sadness, hopelessness) about what's happening as well as listen with compassion to the feelings of others.

9. Inspire Hope and Activism.

When we uncover bias, discrimination and injustice with students, it's important we don't leave them with overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and despair. It can easily happen when you consider the monumental task of making the world more equitable and just. At the same time, we don't want to fill their heads with false or empty hope. It is useful to convey a sense of "[critical hope](#)" that sustains positive expectations and inspires action and [activism](#). One way to do this is by teaching about small and large efforts of social change movements and how they brought about progress throughout history. Provide [examples](#) of social justice triumphs won through the blood, sweat and tears of ordinary and extraordinary people. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." Help your students exemplify that sentiment.