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# RACIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

RESOURCE GUIDE

- WHY RACIAL EQUITY & JUSTICE?
- TALKING RACE
- TOOLS FOR ASSESSMENT, STRATEGIC PLANNING AND ACTION

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# CREATING THE SPACE TO TALK ABOUT RACE IN YOUR SCHOOL

Racial dynamics, disparities and divisions permeate our society, communities, schools and classrooms. Systemic racism is so deeply rooted in our history, culture and institutions that there's no escaping it. Visible or not, its impacts are ever-present.

Yet, discussions of racism are typically not part of our curriculum — unless we're teaching social sciences or literature, or highlighting a particular holiday or hero. And even then, the race content may often be lacking or lackluster.

Adding to this context is the fact that a majority of our public school students are students of color while only 18 percent of our teachers are teachers of color. This presents different challenges for white teachers and teachers of color when approaching issues of race.

Because racism is complex and contentious, many of us are afraid to even broach the subject. Fear of opening a can of worms and making a mistake can be paralyzing. It often feels easier and safer to avoid the topic altogether. Instead of calling attention to racism, we too often wish it would just go away. But whether we choose to talk about it or not, racism is already in the building. And, the more we avoid it, the more it grows.

Silence and inaction reinforce the status quo. Avoidance speaks volumes — it communicates to students of color that racism doesn't



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matter enough to warrant attention and, by omission, invalidates their experiences, perspectives, identities and lives. White students, on the other hand, often see racism being accepted and normalized, without acknowledgement or accountability. And the lofty ideal of educational excellence and equity for all students, if it even exists at your school, may seem like a hollow commitment.

To advance real solutions, we need to address real problems. As teachers, we have “teachable moments,” or opportunities to constructively and productively address race. But these opportunities need to be thoughtfully created, seized, planned and managed. We have choices when addressing matters of race. In our own classroom, we are the power-holder, the gatekeeper, and the standard setter. One choice is to unconsciously and passively perpetuate racism, while the other is to consciously and actively pursue racial equity.

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You probably don't have to revamp your entire curricula or classroom practice. But there are many ways we can make room for addressing racial dynamics. Discussions in your classroom can even be steppingstones to addressing race in your school, school district and community. Creating the space to talk about race can open the way for some of the most powerful learning and change that you and your students will ever experience.

The following tips can help you make race conversations normal, constructive and successful. These skills are best learned through collective dialogue with others committed to addressing racial equity, as well as through lots of practice. When discussions of race and racism become normalized, the promise of equity can be realized.

## 1. Create a Welcoming Classroom and School

Each class has its own culture and learning climate. When you make equity and inclusion prominent priorities in your classroom norms, routines and environment, your students will feel a greater sense of belonging, safety and openness. Balance participation and learning opportunities.

The more you can form authentic relationships and connections with all your students and their families, the more you will understand them—especially those who typically face the most marginalization, such as students of color, LGBTQ students, students from low-income families, English language learners, new immigrants, and students with physical or learning disabilities. New research is beginning to find that teacher empathy can be a key factor in student success and the reduction of punitive disciplinary actions.

Create a supportive culture and hold an affirming space for all of your students, individually and collectively. Use diverse curriculum materials, differentiated instruction methods and give students some choices to accommodate different interests and learning styles. Begin with your own class, but don't stop there. Consider ways to contribute to the welcoming climate of your school. For example, excess surveillance often unfairly targets and triggers students of color due to prevailing patterns of racial bias, thereby undermining efforts to create a school climate that is inclusive and conducive to learning.



## 2. Root Out Biases and Barriers

Everyone, regardless of race, can have unconscious racial bias. Be willing to examine your own bias and the ways you may be privileged or unaware. Reflect upon all aspects of your teaching practice. Could your curriculum, pedagogy, grading, classroom management or disciplinary practices be giving preference to some students while putting others at a disadvantage? Are there any barriers to learning and success that some students may be experiencing? What are the racial impacts of different policies and practices at your school and school district?

Look at available data to see if there are patterns of inequitable outcomes or unintended consequences. Invite observation, discussion and feedback from colleagues and students about routine practices in order to surface lessons and equitable alternatives.

### 3. Encourage Self-Expression

Give your students the ability and validation to bring their full racial and cultural identities into your classroom so they can be themselves and speak their truths. Trust their wisdom and show deep respect. Discussions can begin by giving students an opportunity to share their experiences, perspectives or stories. Identify and appreciate points of connection, as well as differences.

Give students permission to only share what they want. Don't put anyone on the spot or expect any individual to represent their racial or cultural group. Your students may be your best teachers about matters of race, each with unique experience and expertise.

### 4. Be Open Yourself

Be willing to share different dimensions of your own racial identity and cultural background. Be open about your experience with racial inequities and/or racial privilege and any efforts you've participated in to advance racial justice. How has your racial identity been both a strength and a challenge in your life? What have you learned along the way, what were your mistakes, and what are you still learning?

If you are white, you may be used to the privilege of not having to think or talk about race, especially your own. Push yourself to take some risks, which will likely lead to some rich learning. Your honesty and humility will help your students open up.

### 5. Engage, Don't Avoid

Racism is perpetuated by silence—and silence is complicity. Being “colorblind” often serves as a pretense to downplay the significance of race, deny the existence of racism, and erase the experience of students of color. Be willing to lead the uncomfortable conversations and turn them into teachable moments. Learn to break through your own discomfort to embrace the tensions and unknowns.

When racism needs to be addressed but is being avoided, make it your job to initiate and facilitate a constructive conversation. Don't put the burden on students of color to have to bring things up or do all the heavy lifting to help white students

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learn. Even if you don't feel confident or fully skilled, challenge yourself and be courageous. At the other end of the spectrum, you also don't want too heavy-handed about race, where the discussion feels forced or too narrowly framed. Instead, you want to strategically provide the space for students to bring up their own angles on an issue. Let go of perfection and expect some messiness. Like anything else, it gets easier with practice.

## 6. Create Opportunities for Discussion

Use current events, cultural happenings and local angles to spark relevant and meaningful discussions among your students. Pop culture (e.g. music, movies, sports, celebrities) is particularly engaging for young people, supplying continuous fodder for important race conversations. Keep abreast of race-related news sites or social media by people of color to get ideas for hot topics.

Discussions about race are often reactive, once blatant racism has occurred, and often not very constructive—with lots of blaming and shaming. Be proactive by creating planned opportunities for students to share stories and life experiences in ways that connect to your curriculum. You still may need to react, at times, to incidents of racism in your classroom—such as micro-aggressions (routine slights and insults)—but you can prepare in advance your process for addressing them so that you're not caught off-guard. You'll need to make your discussions developmentally appropriate, but students at all levels — even very young — are already aware of, and affected by, race.

## 7. Talk About Racism and Racial Equity

If you want to get real about race, you have to also be willing to talk about racism and racial equity. Here are some concepts that you can introduce to add clarity and context to your discussions:

Race is not simply an individual characteristic or cultural identity. More significantly, it is a social category and a power dynamic—a marker of a racial group's positional power in society. Racial identities are socially assigned, regardless of how you self-identify. While attention to diversity (variety) is important, it is even more critical to address equity (fairness or justice), since racism is fundamentally about power.

Systemic racism — inequities and ideas about race based on history, institutions and culture — routinely advantages white people and disadvantages people of color. Some racism is conscious and intentional, but a lot of racism is unconscious and unintentional (also known as implicit bias). Racism can be intensified by other intersecting inequities, such as gender and class, thus race requires explicit, but not exclusive attention.

Racial equity (or racial justice) is the systematic fair treatment of all people, resulting in fair opportunities and outcomes for everyone. Racial equity is not just the absence of discrimination but also the presence of values and systems that ensure fairness and justice. Systematic equity, which affirmatively and continually supports and ensures the fair treatment of all people, is needed to supplant the system of racism.

Racism is experienced at many levels—internalized, interpersonal, institutional and structural. Interpersonal manifestations of racism get a lot of our attention because they are more visible and visceral. But they are often just the superficial symptoms of broader systems with deeper root causes. Engaging in a systems analysis, can help students identify deeper causes and generate options for solutions.

This can provide a productive path for your discussions, beginning with the sharing of personal experiences and observations of racism, then working through some analysis and arriving at proposed solutions and strategies to advance racial equity.

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## To engage in a systems analysis of a racial issue, good discussion questions include:

- **Problems**

What racial inequities are you noticing or experiencing? What are the impacts on different racial groups? Who benefits most and who is hurt most?

- **Causes**

What institutions, policies or practices are causing or contributing to the inequities? What social norms, popular myths or cultural biases may be contributing?

- **History**

How did things get this way and are things worsening or improving?

- **Solutions**

What solutions could address the root causes and eliminate the inequities? How would different racial groups be impacted by the proposed solutions?

- **Strategies**

What strategies and actions could be used to advance the solutions?

- **Leadership**

Who are the stakeholders most affected by the inequities? What kinds of active leadership could they take to advance the proposed solution?



## 8. Establish and Enforce Group Norms

Since conversations about race can be difficult and divisive, establish some agreements before you begin the conversation. Allow your students to generate, agree to, and hold each other accountable to, their own norms. Display these agreements and refer back to them, as needed. Decide upfront on the goals and parameters of the conversation — what you are and are not going to address.

Example group norms are: honoring confidentiality, using “I” statements instead of “You” statements, focusing on actions and impacts rather than assumptions and intentions, participating fully but evenly, deeply listening, allowing disagreement, appreciating feedback instead of getting defensive, and always respecting each other.

Learning and using restorative justice practices, such as peace circles, can also be helpful for addressing harm or conflict. These practices can help bring real issues to the surface while also fostering healthy communication, conflict resolution and relationships.

## 9. Process is as Important as Content

If you expect a challenging conversation, take time to get centered and take some deep breaths together. Try to be fully present with each other, without any distractions. Pay attention not only to what is being said (or not being said), but also to how it is being said, and who is saying it (or who is not speaking). Expect to do more facilitating and process management, with the content of the conversation mostly generated in real time by your students.

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You can invite students to lead all or parts of the conversation. This not only gives them more ownership of the content, but also helps them practice important skills. You can be ready to guide or mediate, if needed, but you don’t always have to lead the discussion, especially if some of your students have more direct experience with the topic at hand.

Even if there is disagreement, as long you’ve followed your group norms and everyone feels heard and respected, the conversation will likely be constructive and productive. Build in movement breaks, as well as time at the end for appreciations and closure.

## 10. Model Your Values and Vision

Practice equity, inclusion, empathy and respect in your own classroom. Your actions, more than your words, will have the greatest impact on your students. They are looking to you for leadership and ally-ship. You can play a formative role in helping them build critical skills for navigating the complexities of race.

Talking about racism is just a start. Taking action is the biggest driver of change. Create opportunities and strategies to move from awareness and analysis to action and impact. You and your students can go beyond the classroom by advocating for equity in your school and school district. Speak up and speak out. Be intentional about supporting more voices and leadership of people of color. And be proactive by proposing bold and concrete solutions that embody the values and vision of equity and inclusion for all.

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