

How to have conversations about race in the classroom

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Quizlet is proud to partner with teachers to showcase authentic voices on our blog. This guest post is by Femi Lewis.

It can be argued that racism and social injustice is part of the fabric of the United States--just as American as an apple pie.

It just does not taste as good.

Throughout United States history, institutional and individual acts of discrimination have marginalized many groups of people. And although many laws have been established to protect American citizens, racism and social injustice are still present in our society.



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In the past year, for example, Americans witnessed the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis through social media posts--shedding light on the intersection of personal and institutional racism. In response, organized protests took place throughout the spring and summer--demanding change to social injustice.



AP Photos: Seattle Times. Image is part of slideshow [here](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all Americans--yet according to the [CDC](#), members of ethnic groups are dying at rates greater than their white counterparts. This too, sheds light on disparities existing in society.

For classroom teachers who are willing, these moments present a great opportunity to discuss race, social injustice and the impact it has on all of our lives. It is also a moment to begin thinking about how educators can serve as antiracists--in their classrooms and beyond.

Discussing topics around race is difficult. Everyone--teachers and students--walk into the classroom with their own experiences and personal beliefs. And sometimes, our

differences make those conversations hard to digest. Yet, having thought-provoking discussions about race and social injustice is a great way to recognize our differences and then, work to heal our society through our consistent actions.

How to Talk to Kids About Race



While it is important to have relevant and intentional conversations with students about racism and social injustice, it takes a lot of work. Educators must be prepared to facilitate productive conversations about race, racism and social injustice. For English and social studies teachers these topics more than likely come up with regularity. However, all willing teachers should be prepared to facilitate a conversation around racism--you never know when a teachable moment might present itself.

This post offers resources to prepare teachers to have honest conversations about race. In addition, we have outlined some classroom-ready strategies to facilitate these conversations with your students.

1: Self Reflection

Educators can play an important role in helping students discover racism and social inequality as our role is to facilitate discussions and help students come to conclusions.

Yet, it's important to note that educators can hold personal bias and in fact, be racist, too.

A quick Google search will produce droves of news reports of teachers who were removed from classrooms for making racist remarks. How were these comments probably made? More than likely, during a classroom discussion that went awry. And so, it's important to consider that while educators do have an opportunity to provide a forum, it's also important that the space be used to share facts and experiences in a manner that makes everyone feel safe and valued.

In 1989, lawyer and civil rights advocate **Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw** coined the term intersectionality. The term allows us to understand how race, class, gender and other characteristics divide and overlap. Crenshaw's purpose of the term is to help demolish racial hierarchies through not just coming to terms with our identities but even deeper--realizing the structural and systemic issues related to racism, discrimination and inequality as a result of our identities.

The first way educators can prepare themselves to have candid discussions about racial issues is to be aware of their own identity and privilege. We all navigate through society in different ways--and this is greatly because of gender,

race, social class and even religion. As an educator who is interested in discussing racial issues, it is important to think about the ways that your privilege (and we've all got privilege!) and identity influence your view of the world. In addition, you must consider how your privilege and identity impacts how you navigate the world, interact with students, and participate in conversations about race.

Coming to terms with our own biases and privilege is not always easy. However, if you want to begin tackling how to identify and process your own biases, try this resource from the University of California-San Francisco. The videos and resources included will help you think about how bias impacts others on an individual and institutional level.

If you are ready to discover and begin unpacking your personal privilege, check out the University of Michigan's Instructor's Guide to Understanding Privilege. The activities included will help you to reflect on your own privileges and consider how it can be present in your classroom.

Remember: if you want to facilitate conversations in your classroom about racism and social injustice, the conversation must first begin with you. After all, as educators, it is important that we not only provide a space for discussion, but be ready to think of the roles we play individually and as part of an institutional structure that could allow racism to exist.

2: Build a Foundation: Becoming an AntiRacist Pedagogue

Once you've begun to unpack your personal biases and understand your intersectionality, you can then begin the work of understanding issues related to racism. You can also consider the need for greater diversity, equity and inclusion.

Doing this important work will help you to become an educator who consistently works to deconstruct institutional racism.

Like step one, this work takes time. We have to read, listen to various media outlets and participate in conversations that will help us become aware and think critically. And while you are learning, it's not to begin teaching--yet. Instead, be open to ideas, ask questions and learn from others.

To begin, it is important to understand the development of racism and inequality in the United States. An informative documentary to watch is **Slavery and the Making of America**. This four part series shows viewers how enslavement assisted in the development of the United States while also legally marginalizing African-Americans. In addition the documentary is noted for its ability to show the humanity of enslaved African-Americans through a variety of stories and reenactments.

In addition, to further understand the foundation of institutional racism, watch **The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow**. Like Slavery and the Making of America and Africans in America, this documentary provides a historical context to how racism was further embedded into the

fabric of the United States and was consistently used as a tool of oppression.

All three documentaries have accompanying websites with critical thinking questions that are traditionally used in a classroom setting.

However, since you are developing your own toolkit, it does not hurt to consider answering these questions yourself. By doing so, you will build your understanding of institutional racism and its impact on everyone in the United States.

Teaching Tolerance has tremendous professional development resources.

Particularly relevant is the site's "**Let's Talk**" series, which provides guidance on talking about race.

Since it is the responsibility of educators to help students identify examples of institutional racism and provide space to discuss its impact, we have to constantly consider how we want to navigate these conversations. Teaching Matters provides **powerful resources** to help teachers navigate conversations about race--first with themselves and then, with students.

Remember that the process of becoming an antiracist is ongoing--it won't begin and end by watching documentaries, participating in discussions and reading texts. Instead, it will require that educators apply their knowledge and understanding to their teaching practices and create a classroom environment that supports antiracism.

3 Facilitate Conversations About Race

Once you have identified you begun working consistently on steps one and two, you can begin having age-appropriate conversations with your students. Remember: the process of becoming an antiracist is a constant work in progress. You may face challenges but the most important action is that you consistently work to end racism.

There is no better place to cultivate a more just and equitable future than in the classroom. This list from Teaching Tolerance details items that are essential to productive conversations about race:

Acknowledging the importance of race in your students' lives.

Dispelling ideas about a biological basis for race.

Boning up on the history of race as a social construct and means of control.

Creating a safe environment with clear communication guidelines.

Identifying common roadblocks to productive discussion.

Recognizing that disparities exist but need not persist.

Speaking from your own experience.

Creating opportunities for students to speak from their own experience.

To get started, here is a lesson plan from **Teaching Tolerance** that centers on student identities. Done properly, this lesson plan may empower students to center their identities as essential parts of how and why they learn.

Then, dive into Quizlet's anti-racist **Be the Change** study sets. Quizlet worked with

organizations including Teaching Tolerance , Newsela, The New York Times's 1619 Project and NPR to create these sets on race.

In moments where conversations get tough, remember that nothing worth having comes easy. Be patient with yourself, ask the hard questions and be present for your students. After all, every step we take to create a more just and equal future begins by having true knowledge and understanding of injustice.