

Preparing to Discuss Race and Police Violence in the Classroom

Recent events involving the killing of Black people by police have sparked expressions of outrage and injustice across the country. While the world watches these cases play out in the media and criminal justice system, these tragic events are teachable moments in classrooms across the District of Columbia Public Schools. The recent deaths of George Floyd, a Black man in Minnesota, Breonna Taylor, a Black woman in Kentucky, Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man in Georgia and Tony McDade, a Black Trans man in Florida have ignited both uprisings and peaceful protests across the world. Although these incidents occurred in other cities, they hit home for us here in DCPS where a majority of our school leaders and our students identify as Black as well as nearly half of our teachers.

In an effort to help teachers prepare for and navigate difficult discussions with their students on race, racism and police violence, we have compiled a list of resources and a protocol to support these important and necessary conversations.

Why engage? School is a place where students should be able to express feelings, ask questions and seek to gain a better understanding of complex and challenging events happening in the world around them. As a district, we believe that it is a responsibility of teachers to discuss difficult issues such as race and racism with our students. For a thoughtful consideration of the impact of teachers' voices on students, please read this piece from Teaching Tolerance's "Perspectives": [Don't Say Nothing](#). As author Jamila Pitts writes, "We may be uncomfortable talking about race, but we can no longer afford to be silent. We have chosen a profession, which—like parenting— requires that our comforts come second to those of children."

What grade level? There are ways to talk about race with children of all ages. Children as young as two years use race to reason about people's behaviors (Hirschfield, 2008). By kindergarten, children begin to show some of the same racial attitudes that adults in our culture hold (Kinzler, 2016). Explicit conversations about interracial friendship can dramatically improve their racial attitudes in as little as a single week (Bronson & Merryman, 2009).

- **Infants and Toddlers:** Use diverse, age-appropriate books that deal with discrimination, explain feelings from different perspectives and show videos of peaceful protests ([CNN](#)).
- **Tweens and Teens:** Talk about the types of unfairness they see or feel in their everyday lives ([CNN](#)).

In an effort to support teachers in DCPS to integrate discussions based on recent events into their classrooms, the following document provides:

- Ten suggestions for preparing and framing a conversation using democratic principles while also allowing students, especially those who have experienced racial profiling, to express their views;
- Resources teachers can use to build their own background knowledge or to share with students to help frame classroom discussions; and
- A six-step protocol for engaging students and staff in a process for examining, understanding, and responding to complex issues related to diversity and equity in schools.

Ten Suggestions for Framing Classroom Discussion

The ten suggestions below have been adapted from TeachableMoment.org¹, a project of Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility.

When educators approach classroom discussions concerning incidents of racism, profiling or other similar topics, we must be keenly aware of the raw emotions that can surface among our students and people within the community. The following steps, not necessarily in chronological order, can help make the conversation as productive as possible.

1. **Create a safe and supportive tone in your classroom.** Sometimes students don't participate in discussions about sensitive issues because they worry that they will be teased, their opinions will be ridiculed, or strong feelings will arise because the topic hits close to home. To create a safe and supportive environment, make group agreements at the beginning of the year (consider the [Courageous Conversation protocol](#) for agreements). Remind students that when they talk about groups of people, they should try to avoid speaking in absolutes: use the word "some," not "all." Hold community-building activities to create a positive and respectful classroom environment and resolve conflicts proactively. Most importantly, model how to talk about sensitive and controversial topics by being honest and open yourself, respecting different points of view and accepting students' feelings.
2. **Prepare yourself.** Before you delve into a difficult topic with your students, educate yourself with background knowledge. TeachableMoment.org has lessons on many key issues that provide both background information and suggested activities. Next, articulate your own point of view on the topic for yourself so that when students ask for your opinion, you will be prepared. Though many teachers try to keep their own points of view out of the classroom, if it is appropriate to share yours, try to wait until the end of the discussion.

Please see the DCPS Collected Resources page later in this document for suggestions of where to find useful resources to learn more and prepare yourself.

Also, consider in advance the possible "triggers" for your students. For example, if you are discussing police brutality, remember that you will almost certainly have students who have been victims of racial profiling in your classroom. Some of these students may feel relieved to discuss a topic so relevant to their lives, while others may not feel comfortable discussing this in a classroom setting. This doesn't mean you should avoid discussing potentially controversial topics, but you should be mindful not to highlight students who may wish to remain silent. Be aware that strong feelings could arise and plan in advance for how to handle them. Remind your students about the agreements and explain that this issue may affect some students very personally. Depending on the topic, you may even want to speak in advance with those students, or their parents, who have a personal connection to it. Additionally, our schools have a clinical social worker who is trained to handle trauma with students. You may want to reach out in advance to the social worker or other support staff in the school who can be a support to students so they are aware.

3. **Find out what students already know or have experienced about the topic.** Start with what the students already know. You can assess their prior knowledge in a variety of ways: create a semantic web as a whole class and brainstorm associations with the topic; have them talk with a partner; or have them write in response to a prompt. If the topic is very delicate, you might ask them to write anonymously first, then use that writing to decide how to proceed in a later class. Make a list of all the questions they

¹ Spiegler, J. (2014, December 4). Teaching about controversial or difficult issues. Retrieved from <http://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/teaching-about-controversial-or-difficult-issues>

have, either publicly or for your own planning. These questions are an additional window into what students already know, or think they know, and what they don't know. Ask students to articulate where they got their information/formulated their opinions and invite them to talk about how they know their sources are reliable. Remind them that, when learning about or discussing sensitive information, they should always ask, "What do I know and how do I know it?" While students should be pushed to corroborate information from multiple sources and consider perspective, be sure not to undermine the value of students' life experiences as well.

4. **Compile the students' questions and examine them together.** After giving students basic information about your topic, elicit questions they still have. If they are focusing on content questions (who, what, where, why, when), expand their inquiry so they think beyond the basic facts and dig into deeper or "essential" questions. For example, if you are going to discuss the killing of George Floyd, content questions might be: Who was George Floyd? Where did he grow up? These questions are important, but questions such as "Why do you believe the police killed him?" and "How should communities react to this tragedy?" push students to make connections beyond one news story and lead to a more complex understanding of the situation. Another fruitful line of questioning might be asking how the issue affects their lives in Washington, DC and how it affects society at large.
5. **Make connections.** Help students make connections between the topic at hand and their own lives. How does the issue affect them or their family, friends or community? Why should they care? If there is no obvious connection, help them find one. Often, starting with multimedia, whether photos, video or infographics, can hook students. You might also help them make connections by thinking about what else they know about, in current news or in history, that shares some of the same details.
6. **Have students investigate and learn more.** It is critical that students have a chance to find answers to their questions, conduct research, talk to people, and learn more in a way that makes the topic meaningful for them. First, however, make sure your students understand how to tell the difference between opinions and facts. You might make a T-chart and use examples from a news article on a topic you are studying to demonstrate, then invite students to find and share their own examples from additional articles.

For example, if you were engaging your class on the topic of the recent demonstrations here in Washington D.C., students could read and compare information and opinion from sources such as the mainstream media and Twitter/Facebook. They might start with a news article for factual background information, then read an editorial to see how an opinion piece about the same topic is written. Students might then study a timeline about the events leading up to the incident or watch a video. Finally, they might learn about public perception of this incident by analyzing a Gallup poll that shows opinions on the topic broken down by race, geography, or other demographic groups. They might look for related news and opinions to prompt rich discussions and open up opportunities to hear other students' voices. Remember to point students to sources with contrasting political slants as well. For example, they might contrast reporting on the same topic in The Progressive versus The Weekly Standard, or the Center for American Progress versus the Heritage Foundation. Encourage students to seek out a range of people to learn more, including people who have strong opinions or special expertise on the topic. While students are gathering this information, emphasize that even "factual" information has a point of view. While they are researching, they should ask themselves: What is the point of view of this source? How reliable is it, and why? Lastly, examining current events within a historical context is an important way to help students develop a deeper understanding both of the past and today's world.

Please see the DCPS Collected Resources page later in this document for suggestions of where to find useful resources for students to learn more.

7. **Explore students' opinions and promote dialogue.** After they have researched a topic thoroughly, students are ready to form and express their own points of view. It is important to encourage them to be open to different points of view. You might lead an "opinion continuum" exercise where they show whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree or are somewhere in between or not sure on a variety of topics. Help promote dialogue, as opposed to debate. Dialogue aims for understanding, an enlargement of view, complicating one's thinking and an openness to change. Provide opportunities for various kinds of group discussion where different perspectives get shared. These opportunities can be found in lessons available on TeachableMoment.org and include think-pair share, conversation circles, group go-rounds, panels, micro-labs, and fishbowls.
8. **Be responsive to feelings and values.** Even though you have set up agreements at the outset and developed a safe and supportive classroom environment, once a controversial topic emerges you need to continue to monitor classroom tone. Remind students about the agreements, especially if they are not being adhered to. Take the emotional "temperature" of the classroom periodically to find out how students are feeling and encourage the discussion of feelings throughout. Build in different ways for students to participate, but also to opt out if a discussion is emotionally difficult. Give opportunities for students to write their thoughts, perhaps anonymously, instead of sharing verbally. Remind students that while you want them to participate, they always have the right to "pass" if they feel uncomfortable. Again, if you anticipate that a certain topic may elicit too many strong feelings for a particular student, talk with them in advance.
9. **Make home connections.** Use parents and other family members as primary sources by having students interview them as part of their research. Communicate with parents/guardians about your approach to discussing controversial issues. You can do this by sending a letter home in the beginning of the year and encouraging parents to let you know if there are any sensitive issues for their family so you will be prepared.
10. **Do something.** If students are engaged in an issue discussed in class and feel strongly about it, they may want to do something about it. Your study should be an opportunity for taking informed action. This could involve learning more and doing more focused research. It could also involve helping students carry out a social action or community service project related to the issue. Students can learn more about how other young people did projects around recent issues in the news, such as starting a petition, organizing large student demonstrations, and speaking out on the topic. If the issue is a political one, they can engage in writing letters, speaking at public hearings, raising money, participating in demonstrations or writing articles for a local or school newspaper.

DCPS-Collected Resources for Further Research/Reading

Preparation

In addition to reading widely, [this teacher preparation activity](#) from Teaching Tolerance is helpful to use prior to engaging in these types of discussions with students. While it's framed specifically around teaching "The New Jim Crow", the strategies are widely applicable.

The following are links to sites where you can find additional collections of related resources:

Teaching Tolerance: Teaching About Race, Racism and Police Violence
Teaching for Change: Teaching Black Lives Matter
Black Lives Matter Syllabus (Professor Frank Leon Roberts, New York University)

Suggested articles for processing racial incidents (both recent and older):

George Floyd. Ahmaud Arbery. Breonna Taylor. What do we tell our children? Don't Say Nothing.
'Moments like now are why we teach': Educators tackle tough conversations about race and violence — this time virtually
Teachers Must Hold Themselves Accountable for Dismantling Racial Oppression
Aren't More White People Than Black People Killed by the Police? Yes, but No
Why Is the N.Y.P.D. After Me?
Have You Ever Interacted With the Police?
When The Media Treats White Suspects And Killers Better Than Black Victims
Melissa Harris-Perry's Searing Tribute To Black Men Killed By Police
The 12 key highlights from the DOJ's scathing Ferguson report

Resources for learning about activism:

The Movement for Black Lives
Campaign Zero
Black Lives Matter
NPR's Kelly McEvers talks with Jelani Cobb, whose article in the New Yorker charts the genesis and evolution of the Black Lives Matter movement
Young People Grapple With Whether To Follow Colin Kaepernick's Lead (Youth Radio:NPR's Youth Desk)
Colin Kaepernick takes part in high school team's protest of police killings
Girl Scouts - Help Your Kids Take Action Against Racism

Collaborative Problem-Solving for Equity & Justice: A 6-Step Model²

The purpose of this model is to facilitate an organized process for examining, understanding, and responding to complex issues related to diversity and equity in schools:

1. Problem Identification

Identify or name the situation and relevant related issues. What is the conflict? What is the source of the conflict?

2. Perspectives

Create a list of every person, group, and institution impacted by the incident. How is each of these people and institutions affected by the situation? Be sure to include possible victims, victimizers, members of the community, and anyone else who is touched by the incident directly or indirectly. It may be necessary to make some assumptions for this step, intensifying the importance of incorporating as many voices and perspectives as possible into the process of compiling the information.

² Gorski, P.C. (2009). Collaborative problem-solving for equity and justice: A 6-step model. EdChange (<http://www.edchange.org/>).

3. Challenges and Opportunities

With the varied perspectives in mind, what are the individual and institutional challenges and constraints within which the situation must be addressed? What are the challenges based on the individuals directly involved, and what institutional constraints must inform an approach for addressing the situation? What are the educational and growth opportunities presented by the incident, both for the people directly involved and the institution?

4. Strategies

Brainstorm approaches for addressing the situation, attempting to maximize the extent to which the negative outcomes of the situation are addressed while simultaneously maximizing the extent to which you take advantage of educational and growth opportunities. Keep in mind the varied perspectives and the fact that any solution will affect everyone differently. This is not the step at which to challenge and critique each other's ideas. Record every idea, no matter how unreasonable it may sound to individuals in the group.

5. Solutions

Focus your strategies into a formal plan of action. Keep in mind the varied perspectives as well as the challenges and opportunities. Be sure to come up with at least two or three specific responses, whether they focus on the individual conflict or the underlying issues at an institutional level.

6. Expected Outcomes

Name the outcomes you foresee as a result of the solutions you identified. Revisit the perspectives step to ensure a standard of equity and fairness.