

CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE & RACISM



EMPOWERING EDUCATORS

BEST PRACTICES

Preparation is key when it comes to facilitating challenging conversations about race and racism. Support students as they process race-related events covered in the news and navigate difficult conversations by familiarizing yourself with best practices such as defining terms, relating current events to relevant history, providing options for how students can contribute to the conversation, talking about White privilege and structural racism, developing critical thinking skills, encouraging empathy and activism, and debriefing. All of these important topics are covered in this resource along with tips on planning and moderating conversations and suggestions for what to say in certain situations.

Define terms.

One of the challenges of talking about race is using language that's respectful, accurate, and understood by all. Review the difference between bias, prejudice, racism, and discrimination [here](#). Remember that language isn't static, and personal preferences may vary.

- **Elementary:** [PBS for Parents](#) has many resources — including a video featuring poet and activist Amanda Gorman — that offer age-appropriate discussions about physical differences and why and how to celebrate them.
- **Middle & High School:** Listen to and discuss this [Code Switch podcast](#) about the history of and range of reactions to the term BIPOC.

BIAS vs PREJUDICE

An inclination for or against a person, idea or thing, especially in a way considered to be unfair	Preconceived opinion that is not based on actual experience or reason
Both negative and positive attitudes	Usually negative attitudes
Results in unfairness	Results in discrimination

Source: [Pediaa.com](#)

Connect the past to the present.

When discussing current incidents of racism and injustice, ground the conversation in relevant history like slavery and Jim Crow and provide historical context. But also teach the [depth, breadth, and joy of Black culture](#) and that the history of Black Americans does not begin with their enslavement.

- **Elementary:** Connect the present to the past by referencing local geography: statues of enslavers or land that once belonged to Native American tribes, for example. Share this [conversation among elementary students](#) discussing slavery and current race relations.



Photo by Tom Saunders on [Flickr](#)

- **Middle & High School:** When discussing current acts of violence and racism directed toward Asian Americans, make sure students are aware of the [long history of xenophobia toward Asian Americans](#), such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and the internment camps during World War II.
- **Middle & High School:** Use [Black History Continued](#) from *The New York Times* to explore pivotal movements and transformative figures in Black culture, such as the Harlem Renaissance and specific musicians, artists, and even superheroes.

Provide options.

Remember that certain topics may be particularly sensitive for some students and always offer the option to write about feelings and experiences they may not want to share with the whole class.

- **Elementary:** Encourage students to draw and write in private journals if they don't want to speak out loud or share with the group.
- **Middle & High School:** Be comfortable with silence. Educator Malcolm Cawthorne sets a timer for 30 seconds and [lets the room sit in silence](#) if a student prefers not to talk. Silence allows students to think deeply about challenging topics.

BEST PRACTICES, CONTINUED

Help kids think critically.

Expose them to different media and opinions and encourage them to consider the perspectives and possible biases of journalists, politicians, and celebrities.

- **Elementary:** Use this [lesson about Misty Copeland](#), the first African American Principal Dancer for the American Ballet Theater, to encourage kids to think about how stereotypes and role models can influence career choices.



- **Middle & High School:** After the 2021 Atlanta shootings, in which the majority of victims were women of Asian descent, [Korean journalists](#) quickly shared details of the events and gave readers a nuanced picture of the victims. In contrast, many English-language media outlets misidentified the victims and were slower to label the massacre a hate crime.

Talk about [structural racism](#) and [White privilege](#).

It's important to recognize the unearned and often unrecognized advantages, benefits, and rights given to members of a dominant group as well as how structural racism affects education, law enforcement, immigration, and many other areas of society.

- **Elementary, Middle & High School:** Reference research and share relevant data.

[Studies](#) have shown that people with more 'ethnic-sounding' names experience bias during the hiring process and are less likely to be called back for roles they are qualified for compared to their counterparts.

[Police force](#) is the sixth leading cause of death for Black men.

Encourage empathy.

Provide windows into the experiences of those of different races through conversations, narratives, videos, photos, blogs, and social media. Allow students to express their emotions and teach them to listen with compassion.

- **Elementary:** Read books featuring different races, cultures, and experiences. Literature can serve as a window that allows students to develop empathy and perspective. Download [Empowering Educators: A Guidebook on Race & Racism](#) and see [Step 8: Using an ABAR Lens to Select Books](#) (page 29) for more information.



STEP 8: Using an ABAR Lens to Select Books

- **Middle & High School:** Listen to [NPR's Code Switch podcast](#), hosted by a multi-racial, multi-generational team of journalists interested in how race, ethnicity, and culture play out in our lives and communities.

Inspire hope and activism.

Race and racism are heavy subjects and can lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair. Encourage kids to acknowledge those feelings and use them to make a positive difference in the world by educating others and becoming activists and allies.

- **Elementary:** Have students write a letter to a company or politician about an issue they care about. Share the [example of a 6-year-old girl](#) who wrote a toy company to ask why there were no female soldier figurines.
- **Middle & High School:** Encourage students to take action by peacefully [protesting](#), signing petitions, [writing politicians](#), speaking up about and [reporting](#) acts of racism, and educating friends and family about systemic racism.



“Remind students that a productive critical conversation—one in which participants work toward better understanding one another—doesn't mean no one will disagree. It's OK if participants challenge each other's ideas, but it's not OK to insult one another's identities.”

FACILITATING CONVERSATIONS

Conversations about race and racism are more likely to be productive and contribute to social and emotional learning if facilitators have a plan for navigating a range of emotional responses and reactions as well as language and techniques to encourage respectful dialogue.

1 Planning the Conversation

- Understand your own emotions and triggers.
- Clarify your goals and classroom boundaries.
- Anticipate challenges and strong emotions.

2 Moderating

Use these questions to encourage conversation and reflection:

- *What seems to be the key point here?*
- *Do you agree with that? Why?*
- *What do other people think of this idea?*
- *What would be a strong case against what you just said?*
- *Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?*
- *How might others see this issue?*
- *What have you heard today that has made you think or has touched you in some way?*

Encourage students to respectfully debate and disagree using phrases such as:

- *What did you mean when you mentioned ... ?*
- *I agree and would add ...*
- *I agree when you say ... but disagree when you say...*
- *I disagree when you say ... because ...*

3 Handling Difficult Situations

If someone dominates the conversation, say:

- *It sounds like you have done a lot of thinking about this. Let's see if we can get some other perspectives as well.*
- *Remember that we said everyone would have a chance to talk. Let's see if others have something to add.*

If the debate becomes heated, say:

- *What is at the heart of the disagreement?*
- *What do you think is really important to people who hold that opinion?*
- *Could you say more about what you think?*

If a comment crosses a line, say:

- *The humanity of other people is not up for debate in this classroom.*

If students are feeling discouraged, say:

- *How does that make you feel?*
- *What gives you hope?*

- *How can we make progress on these problems? What haven't we considered yet?*

Sources: [Tips for Facilitating Conversations About Race and Other Challenging Issues - Google Docs](#) from Montgomery County Public Schools Equity Initiatives Unit and [Let's Talk! Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students](#) from Learning for Justice

FACILITATING CONVERSATIONS, CONTINUED

CONVERSATION STARTERS

Try these questions with elementary students:

- *How are the students in our school diverse?*
- *Do you have a friend who is a different race than you?*
- *When you look at your cafeteria, do students group themselves in a certain way? Why do you think that happens?*
- *Think about the characters in your favorite movie, TV show or book. How are the characters like you? Different from you? Would you say the characters are diverse?*

WHEN YOU LOOK AT YOUR CAFETERIA, DO STUDENTS GROUP THEMSELVES IN A CERTAIN WAY?

WHY DO YOU THINK THAT HAPPENS?

Try these with middle and high school students:

- *What are your earliest memories of race?*
- *What messages did you hear about your own race as you were growing up? What messages did you hear about other races? Where did these messages come from?*
- *How often have you thought about your race in the last 24 hours? In the last week?*
- *How does your race factor into the way you make everyday decisions? What about important life decisions?*
- *Have you ever experienced a situation where your race seemed to contribute to an uncomfortable situation?*
- *Do you think our school is racially diverse?*
- *Have you ever witnessed or experienced a “racially charged” situation at school, one that created discomfort or anger around race? How did people react?*
- *If you could change one thing about our school that’s related to race, what change would you recommend? How would you implement it?*
- *How would you compare the attitudes about race you see on our campus to those you see in our town? In our state? In our nation?*

Source: Adapted from materials by the Office of Student Diversity, Engagement and Success at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and reproduced from [Let's Talk! Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students](#) from Learning for Justice

DEBRIEFING

Talking about race and racism can be mentally and emotionally challenging. Even if the conversation was positive, students will need time and space to process emotions before they move on to the next class or activity.

TRY THESE DEBRIEFING TECHNIQUES:

TALKING CIRCLES

Have students gather in a circle and designate a talking piece. Ask a question, such as “How do you feel about today’s lesson?” The student holding the talking piece can answer and then pass it to the next student.

JOURNALING

Journaling allows students to sort through their thoughts and process their emotions more independently. You can offer the opportunity to dialogue with students by writing back and forth.

Start, Stop, Continue...

Use a *Start, Stop, Continue* form to solicit specific feedback.

Next time we discuss race and racism,

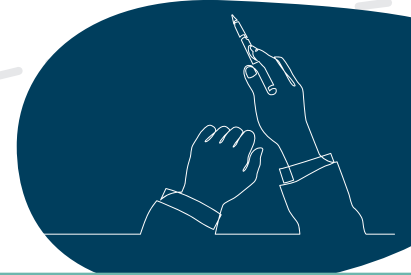
Please start...

Please stop...

Please continue...

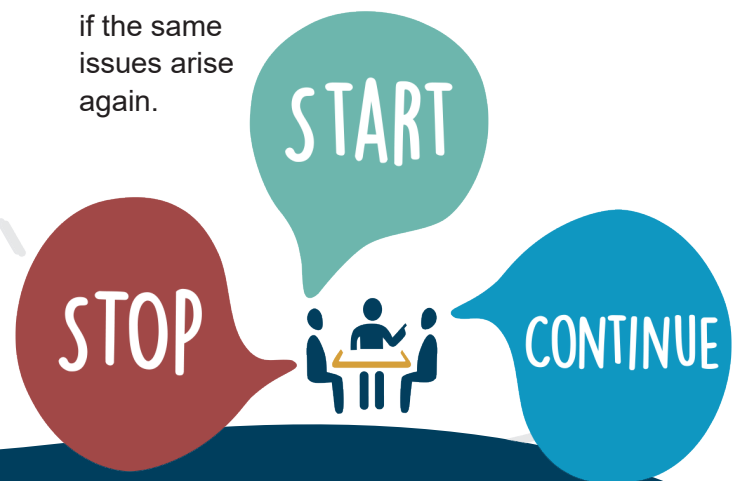
DRAWING

Drawing is another way students can process and reflect. Like journaling, it can be private or shared.



SOLICITING ANONYMOUS FEEDBACK

Students may not want to critique classmates or feel comfortable telling you they did not enjoy parts of the lesson. You can use anonymous feedback to change the format of the conversation next time or recalibrate if the same issues arise again.



Younger kids might not feel comfortable telling you what to do, so you can reword as:

Next time we discuss race and racism,

I hope we start...

I hope we stop...

I hope we continue...

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