



Combating Racism in the Classroom

1. Set up group guidelines

Students, and in particular white students, sometimes don't participate in discussions about race because they feel inadequate, worry they'll be mocked, are embarrassed by their lack of knowledge or concerned that strong feelings will arise. Many may think the topic isn't relevant to them. When engaging in any conversations about tough topics, it is critical to set up group guidelines or agreements to promote a classroom environment that is safe and respectful. Do this collaboratively with students and make sure that the following areas are discussed: listening and interrupting, how to deal with strong emotions, establishing trust, confidentiality, sharing "airtime" and dealing with differences or disagreements. Further, from the beginning establish an environment that allows for mistakes. Because we are products of a biased society, students may not be cognizant that everyone has biases and holds stereotypes. This should be explained to them explicitly. Assume good will and convey to students that they should do the same. Find ways to inspire students to challenge themselves and their assumptions by asking open-ended questions.

2. Help students accept discomfort and uncertainty

A safe learning environment doesn't mean you and your students will or should be comfortable with every discussion. Be prepared for these conversations to potentially be messy and complicated. They may not end as you expect they will. You can remind yourself of this and share that understanding with your students, so you manage everyone's expectations. It is helpful to remember and share with students that often-deep learning, the kind that is lasting and long-term, comes when things are uncomfortable or "sticky" and you are able to work through those things. That's the "aha" or epiphany moment. It may also be helpful to explain to students that often when things are complicated or when there is a conflict, if things are handled well, there can be a higher understanding or improved relationships on the other side.

3. Acknowledge that learning about race and racism is a process

It is often the case that white people who have always been in the majority do not think about their own racial identity the way that people of color often do. Recognize that learning about race and racism is a process because many white

students may not have had the opportunity to reflect on and discuss it. They will come with bias and misinformation, as we all do, and it will take time for them to develop their own understanding and insights. Make it clear that this can be a lifelong process and that one is always learning, including yourself, and that you will be learning together. Introduce fewer complex topics at first and from the beginning, present and use accurate terminology. At the same time, don't sugarcoat or simplify language or concepts. Defining words and the language of race and bias can be one of the first things you do which can include differentiating prejudice, bias, discrimination, racism and implicit bias. In the beginning, establish the fact that we all have a race, and they are included in that. Sometimes white students think that race doesn't apply to them and includes only people of color.

4. Clarify that goal is not to be colorblind

The goal of teaching about race and racism is to help students understand the historical context and current manifestations of racism in the U.S. There are many white people who believe the best way to eliminate racism is to not talk about it and not notice racial differences at all (i.e. be "colorblind"). They may want to tell young people not to notice differences because they conflate noticing differences with having bias. It may also be a way to avoid dealing with discussions of race because they are uncomfortable. It is completely natural to notice race and other physical characteristics; telling children not to see it is incorrect and confusing. Let students know that noticing differences does not promote bias—judging and discriminating based on race does. Further, it's important to acknowledge that white is a racial identity and even explore with students what being white means to them. You may also want to share with parents that you are talking about these issues because some white parents may believe that talking about race makes them or their children racist.

5. Bring learning to life

Integrate multisensory "props" into lessons to deepen learning about a variety of cultures. It's one thing to learn about Mexico from a social studies textbook. It's another to let students see, hear, taste and feel interesting items such as music, Spanish words, folktales, personal stories of immigrants, musical instruments, artwork, crafts, foods, photographs, fabrics and jewelry.

6. Expose students to a variety of people and environments.

Breaking down barriers begins with getting to know people and spending time with them. If you can manage an off-site field trip, try an ethnic fair or festival, ethnic neighborhood, or ethnic restaurant or grocery store. Beforehand, have

kids do some reading or research about the culture(s) that will be explored through the field trip. Encourage students to ask polite questions of people they meet or arrange in advance someone in one of these locations who is willing to spend a few minutes talking to students. Perhaps as part of the experience, they can learn a few words in another language.

7. Web-based Pen Pals

On-site options include virtual (Web-based) “pen pals” or pairing up with a classroom in another country. Or, bring in speakers of a particular cultural group and have students prepare questions in advance. Even school staff and students can serve as speakers but be careful not to single them out or put them “on the spot.” If a local museum makes on-site visits, ask them to bring artifacts, artwork and other cultural treasures to share.

8. Let students pursue their interests.

Children are natural explorers. Encourage students to study a culture they find intriguing. Stimulate curiosity and document learning.

9. Ensure that cultural learning goes beyond parties.

Holidays and foods are important, but make sure to dig deeper to help kids understand the day-to-day experiences of diverse members of a particular culture. This includes people in other countries as well as those in the United States. Do some members of a group or culture face discrimination and racism, inadequate healthcare or other challenges? Do recent immigrants face employment and language barriers? How have events (such as the American Civil Rights Movement) changed the experiences of a group of people over time?

10. Discuss how race/ethnicity, religion, culture, geography and socioeconomic status intersect, resulting in vastly different life experiences for different groups of people.

For engaging pictures and stories about children living in widely varying contexts all over the world, check out James Mollison’s book [Where Children Sleep](#). This title is a great conversation-starter for exploring differences. For example, see the EducationWorld lesson plan [The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Through Children’s Eyes](#).

11. Use books to explore tough topics.

Stock your classroom with books that share the personal experiences of diverse individuals. Engage students in discussion after reading as a group, or have kids

choose a book that interests them and then report back to the class about what they learned. Don't be afraid to read books that explore challenging themes such as bullying, acculturation/assimilation and racism. For ideas, see EducationWorld's comprehensive [Book Suggestions: Multicultural and Diversity](#). If the school library doesn't have titles of interest on the shelf, have kids help raise funds to buy new ones.

12. Help kids get “below the surface” with those from other cultures.

Often out of politeness, fear of the unknown or fear of offending a person who is different from oneself, we hesitate to ask questions that would help us learn about and appreciate diversity. In addition, when young people fail to engage with others who are different from them, stereotypes and misconceptions can flourish. Letting students practice asking questions will increase their comfort level, help them avoid preconceived notions about groups of people, and give them the means to build relationships with diverse individuals. Here are some sample questions to try with students: [source 1](#), [2](#), [3](#) and [4](#).

13. Implement explicit lessons about racism and conflict resolution.

When we teach about different cultures but avoid conversations about the challenging aspects of human differences, the message students may take away is that “because all cultures are interesting and fun, everyone gets along.” Instead, make time for thorough and concrete lessons about overcoming racism and dealing with cultural misunderstandings, mistreatment and clashes. An excellent source for lessons is Kaylene Stevens' [Unit on Racism and Teaching Tolerance in the Classroom](#).

14. Teach about social justice.

Teach about the work of [key organizations \(list 2, list 3, list 4\)](#) and movements that work to promote tolerance and understanding around the world. Discuss career options that involve this kind of work. Engage kids in school-wide and community social-justice work.

15. Connect to ally behavior and engage in social justice.

As your students discuss race, some of them may be interested in addressing the racism they have learned about, both in their interpersonal relationships and in society. Helping your students understand what it means to [act as an ally](#) and learning the different ways to engage in ally behavior is an important next step. White people can act as allies by identifying racism when they see it, calling it out and challenging it in a myriad of ways. You can help to facilitate this process by giving students an opportunity to explore how to act as an ally and practice different strategies—both interpersonal or on a larger stage by getting involved

in [activism](#). There a wide variety of ways to do this including educating others, online activism, advocating for legislation, protesting, creating public awareness, etc. Convey a message of critical hope that when people work together—in the past and in modern times—they can make a difference and improve our society and world.

Sources:

https://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/combating-racism-multicultural-classroom.shtml

<https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/how-should-i-talk-about-race-in-my-mostly-white-classroom>