

Let's Talk! Teaching Race in the Classroom

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Even before the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) opened its doors on September 24, 2016, educators at the museum were committed to fostering open, honest, and productive dialogues on race. Various programs have been designed to prepare educators to bring conversations of race, identity, and racism into the educational setting with the goals of developing positive self-identities, reducing prejudice, and increasing racial understanding to the classroom.

Addressing race and racism as real factors in society allows for a more honest conversation about wealth disparity, unequal living situations, achievement gaps, and the negative effects of microaggressions. For educators, it is imperative to be aware of the effects of racism and to learn how to teach about them to students. NMAAHC's signature workshop, *Let's Talk!*, is designed to give educators tools—historical understanding, racial literacy, and pedagogical framing—that enable them to enter and *be successful* at having the challenging conversations needed with students and others within the educational environment. This article shares some of those tools and actionable steps that teachers can take in the classroom.

Examine Your Own Bias

Many people, educators included, prefer to think of themselves as bias free. The truth is that it is natural for humans to have biases. Just as it is a natural developmental accomplishment for children to categorize items such as cars, animals, and food, people continue to do it with other people. Everyone has biases but those biases can lead to preferential treatment for one group or neglect of another group. It is crucial that educators examine their own internal, often unconscious, biases.

Called implicit biases, educators can begin to understand more about themselves by confronting their own biases. Research shows that the implicit biases of educators are significant indicators in minority student discipline, achievement, and opportunity. A tool that can help uncover where one may have implicit biases is a collection of tests from Project Implicit (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>). It is important to understand that implicit biases are not fixed. These biases are malleable and can be changed if addressed intentionally.

Historical Foundations of Racism

To begin, it is imperative to acknowledge race as a social construct and learn the historical roots of racism. Race, in the U.S. society, is a taboo subject in many settings. People often sidestep the very mention of the word, instead choosing euphemisms or other coded language such as “urban,” “inner city,” or “those people.” Or, as a way to demonstrate that race is unimportant to them, people claim to be colorblind. Research already has shown that being “colorblind” does not help to meet any of the aforementioned goals of reducing racial prejudice or increasing racial understanding. The immediate comfort or semblance of comfort that is maintained by not speak-

ing earnestly about race is a short-lived benefit that can result in missed opportunities for long-lasting interpersonal and systemic change.

To fully understand the unique social construct of race in the U.S., the historical foundations of the race-based system must be explored. Notions of race and racism were created to justify the enslavement of people of African descent that became the primary labor system of the early United States. Learning more about the historic underpinnings that established the hierarchy of the races and empowered the de-humanizing of some people emphasizes how racism was not a natural certainty, but rather systemically created. In the formative years of the United States, laws were put into place that hardened the lines of social status, creating a class of permanent servitude based on race with African Americans on the bottom and whites (males, specifically) at the pinnacle. By recognizing and exploring the intentionality of the laws, educators and students can understand more about the social creation of the division between races as well as begin to see the legacy of the laws and their impacts on society, then and now.

Depending on the age of your students, there are different entry points into history. For older students, analyzing the laws that have institutionalized racism is a powerful demonstration of legalized discrimination. From the development of colonial laws restricting people of African descent from basic freedoms, to the laws that conferred a status of servitude, to the post-emancipation Jim Crow laws that continued to keep



The National Museum of African American History and Culture holds a reception for educators during the NCSS annual conference, Dec. 3, 2016, in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Leah L. Jones/For NMAAHC)

African Americans in a position of second-class citizenship—understanding the evolution of the laws is critical in understanding the institutional nature of U.S. racism. When the creation of race is explored through the intentionality of the created laws and norms meant to establish a society where whiteness conferred power and high social status, and blackness implied less-than-human characteristics and a ‘permanent’ underclass, the depths of what racism is to the foundation of the American society can be unpacked and dissected.

Developing Racial Literacy

The development of racial literacy among teachers, students, and parents is a crucial step in helping the fight against prejudice and racism. Racial literacy can be described as a way of seeing and responding to the racial climate and racial structures. A person who is

racially literate can recognize and name, and, therefore, be armed to confront everyday racism by interrupting patterns of inequity. Naming the dimensions of racism and the effects of racism gives us a pathway toward understanding people, things, concepts, and more. The ability to define something can also lift the veil on taboo subjects and create space to have more challenging conversations.

Some terms that commonly arise in the challenging conversations around race are implicit bias, stereotypes, institutional racism, prejudice, and structural racism. Know the vocabulary: understand not only the meaning but its impact and what it looks like every day. Have a conversation with your students, to share prior knowledge and create shared meaning around terms. For young children, begin with concepts such as fairness, sharing, and equality. Once there is a common understanding of the terms

that arise in the conversation around race, it becomes possible for everyone to discuss similar concepts and work towards common solutions.

Educators have the task ahead of them of not only teaching the traditional subjects, but also of helping their students learn to navigate the racial climate, i.e., helping their students to develop racial literacy. The more empowered and prepared educators, parents, and students can be, the better they will be able to manage the injustices of society and, hopefully, be ready to counter them when possible.

Starting the Conversation Early

It is imperative for educators to recognize and appreciate how children develop an understanding of race, and at what age conversations should begin. Based on research in the fields of psychology, child development, and education, it is known



This cooking pot was used at the Florida Avenue Grill in Washington, D.C., to cook greens, a staple in African American cuisine. Using a social object such as a cooking pot can allow people to enter difficult conversations. (Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Imar and Tasha Hutchins, Florida Avenue Grill)

that age-appropriate conversations need to happen in the early childhood years (birth to 8 years). By six months, babies recognize racial differences, and by eight years, prejudicial thinking and stereotyping is established. That means that by roughly third grade, children have established perceptions and beliefs about self and others based on race.

Yet, when it comes to discussing race with children many people feel intimidated, if they consider having conversations at all. For years, the “colorblind” approach has been embraced by many early childhood educators, caregivers, and parents. Adults express the belief, “If I teach children to see race, divisive attitudes will emerge and racist thinking will be perpetuated.” Yet when one considers how children learn, to not acknowledge racial differences goes against the natural way children take in, make sense of, and understand their world. Consider a preschool classroom: a favorite and developmentally-appropriate activity is sorting, ordering, and classifying objects, whether they are toys or collections from nature. Children use these same observational skills to sort, order, and classify people. At the same time, children are receiving and processing meta-messages—those conscious and subconscious ideas and beliefs—from external influences including parents, peers, their neighborhood and community, and media. All together, these messages communicate to young children what is “normal” and what groups are privileged. Which goes back to the biggest flaw of the colorblind approach:

children aren’t colorblind. And by not recognizing, honoring, and discussing differences, children are apt to make assumptions that are inaccurate and perpetuate the fallacy of white superiority—exactly what many adults are trying *not* to do.

Having honest, empowering age-appropriate conversations with children is one part of promoting positive identity development in childhood. Identity is a complex, dynamic construct. Although we construct our identities, to some extent, society does too. Our identities affect the way we interact with the world and, in turn, our identities affect the way the world interacts with us. Research shows that talking about identity with young children is fundamental to reducing prejudiced thinking and to promoting equity, tolerance, and justice. Children develop their identity and attitudes through experiences with their bodies, social environments, and their cognitive developmental states. Children progress through certain stages of racial and cultural awareness, as these three factors interact. Because the implicit message “We are all friends” is too vague for young children to understand—it refers to skin color, cultural differences, and other unique characteristics—adults must unpack identity and explicitly address issues of equity and fairness with young children. It is paramount for adults, parents, and educators to generate positive discussions that are age-appropriate about race, gender, culture, and history, because children are aware of differences at an early age. A central message of such

conversations needs to be that a positive sense of self is never developed at the expense of another group. As self-worth develops, so should respect and appreciation for others.

An Anti-Bias Environment

In today’s educational settings, biases are shaping the experiences students have and their future as individuals in society. As educators it is imperative to create a safe space for all students. When we recognize bias—in ourselves and others—we can become *anti-bias* by actively challenging prejudices and injustices. Starting in early childhood classrooms and continuing throughout a student’s life, teachers can do this by engaging in critical thinking, asking questions, problem solving, and supporting students’ development of a fuller understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Even young children are capable of—and should engage in—identifying issues and inequities. By engaging children in inquiry methods and asking them to consider multiple perspectives, young minds are trained to ask questions when injustices arise and respond with empathy and compassion to others.

Anti-bias education, as defined in *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards, has four basic goals.¹ They are:

- Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identity.
- Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human differences; and a deep, caring human connection.
- Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.
- Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

When you embed these goals in your

own teaching practice, profound changes can occur.

Encourage Cross Group Friendships

Having a friend from a different background (referred to in child development research as “cross-group friendships”) helps children to acquire social skills such as empathy and perspective-taking, which can lead to reduced prejudice. A major theory in child development is that having friends of another race helps to diminish bias in childhood. Children are sensitive to the messages about race that they collect and understand from those around them. Knowing this, educators have the significant opportunity to promote the types of personal experiences, like cross-group friendships, that give children the chance to challenge stereotypes. This allows for positive experiences that are based on understanding, respect, and a true value of diversity.

Using Objects to Spark Conversation

By exploring museums with intentionality, educators can discover items among the collection that can help foster the type of age-appropriate positive discussions mentioned above as well as provide a way into the difficult discussions about the harmful effects of racism. The creation of entrance narratives gives educators another tool in their kit to be an agent for anti-bias education and a guide for young people struggling to understand the racism that is a part of the U.S. society.

Many artifacts in museum galleries can be considered social objects that can serve as interpersonal connectors and provide a way for students to investigate similarities among people while uplifting the differences. Social objects, as defined by Nina Simon in her influential work, *The Participatory Museum*,² are objects that can spark conversation by allowing people to focus on something other than themselves. Placing the focus on the object gives people a chance to make connections between themselves and the object, and then subsequently they can

find connections between each other. For example, an ordinary cooking pot, such as the stockpot in the NMAAHC collection, (pictured on p. 64) can stimulate conversation about foods, family traditions, and cultural fusion. Sharing common ground around quintessential human engagement—eating, the need to express oneself, rituals, etc.—creates connections between individuals which can pave the way into deeper conversations about social constructs such as race.

Moving Forward with Kindness

Opening the door to having challenging conversations around race and racism can be overwhelming, so it is important to remember that every small step is progress. Great distances traveled begin with one small step. Each workshop at the NMAAHC weaves in the idea of creating actionable steps so that educators can incorporate the lessons learned, new research, and thoughts that have been discussed into action back in their educational setting. Educators are encouraged to start with creating a goal they can accomplish. The question on the table for all educators is “What specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, relevant, and timely goal can you set for yourself in your practice that will help to facilitate identity understanding in your students?”

Having conversations about race and racism takes practice. The more you engage with the issue of race, the easier

it becomes to have the conversations and the better prepared you will be to tackle the really tough moments when they arise. Three key steps that can be employed in the classroom during difficult conversations around race are:

1. Create Group Norms. One of the best things that educators can do is to prepare their classroom space to be brave spaces where difficult conversations can happen. Establish a set of discussion rules by which everyone in the class can agree to be regulated. Build this in as a group activity towards the beginning of the year. By doing it together, students will feel vested in guidelines for communicating with one another. Having a list of norms already prepared will help maintain order when the conversations turn to challenging topics. For example, some commonly used group norms are

- Only one speaker at a time
- Speak respectfully to each other
- Speak honestly and about one’s own experiences
- Place cell phones on silent
- Agree to accept ambiguity or confusion as a part of the learning process

2. Stay Curious and Reflect Back. This is a skill which works best when employed by educators and students alike during challenging conversation. Seek to understand other viewpoints before reacting or responding. Employing prob-

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Come and join like-minded educators for conversations about strategies to engage those challenging conversations about race within the educational settings. During the week, participate in lectures by experts in the field of education, critical race studies, and child development coupled with museum gallery activities and small group discussions to practice pedagogy techniques.

ing questions will stimulate curiosity and uncover clarity around the discussion, which in turn will allow participants to validate and truly hear what each other participant is saying, even when they may disagree. Use questions such as “This is what I heard you say... Is it what you meant?”, “What leads you to this point of view?”, or “How do you know that?”

3. Reflection Time. Allowing time to reflect on new or differing viewpoints will give students the opportunity to process what has been said in the classroom. The reflection can be done in a variety of ways and should be something that students share if they feel comfortable. As the educator hears the reflections, she or he will be able to discern where more unpacking is needed for the whole group.

Conclusion

When educators commit to embracing education that is anti-bias and focuses on positive identity development for *all* children, the work is often hard, at times emotional, and demands a look at one’s own identity, bias, and baggage. As we endeavor to assist the children in our collective spheres, it is important to reflect on *oneself* at the outset. Be kind *and* honest. Interrupting racism is a lifelong journey, comprised of many acts.

The work done with children has the power to impact what society will be in the future. We can help build strong children who will grow to make the world more equitable and kind. Never doubt that the work of one single educator is important and powerful! 🌍

Notes

1. Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards, *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* (Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2010).
2. Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010).

References

- Caitrin Blake, “Teaching Racial Literacy: Concepts and Strategies for Educators,” blogpost, February 10, 2015, <http://online.cune.edu/teaching-racial-literacy/>.
- Jane Bolgatz, *Talking Race in the Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003.
- Howard C. Stevenson, *Promoting Racial Literacy in Schools: Differences that Make Difference*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2014.

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own words”; in *From Slavery to Freedom*, this section is referred to as “Windows in Time,” which includes diverse voices and experiences of individuals. The incorporation of these narratives deconstructs the notion that all Blacks share the same experiences. More importantly, by focusing on the knowledge and lived experiences of Black people, students are exposed to a more inclusive narrative with personal stories as opposed to the sterile, desensitized accounts presented in traditional U.S. history textbooks.

5. Is the text interdisciplinary? Does it embrace perspectives from other disciplines (literature, art, sociology, law, politics, etc.)?

Yes. Although these are history textbooks, to fully understand the historical context and the cultural, social, economic, and political experiences of Black people these disciplines must

be incorporated. Literature and art, in particular, are woven throughout the text starting with art images and sculptors of ancient African civilizations. Specifically, sections on the Harlem Renaissance highlight the ways African American authors and artists addressed racial inequality but also celebrated and promoted Black culture and pride. Both texts include Hip-Hop as an art form that provides not only entertainment but social commentary on economic and political conditions of Black communities. Finally, chapters and sections dedicated to politics are central to the discussion of African American struggles for political voice and democratic rights.

A careful examination of both *From Slavery to Freedom* and *African American History* using a Critical Race Curriculum framework illustrates the strengths and contributions of these textbooks as curriculum resources for an African American studies course. In addition to these texts, teachers should incorporate and supplement their teaching with primary source documents, literary works of Black scholars and his-

torians, and audio-visuals both fiction and non-fiction of historical events and individuals. Lastly, teachers considering textbooks other than the two reviewed may want to use the guiding questions to select appropriate texts. These questions may also be used in selecting U.S. history textbooks so that we might provide opportunities for all our students to learn and appreciate a broader range of American experiences. 🌍

Notes

1. Manny Fernandez and Christine Hauser, “Texas Mother Teaches Textbook Company a Lesson on Accuracy,” *The New York Times* (Oct. 5, 2015).
2. L.J. King, C. Davis, and A.L. Brown, “African American History, Race, and Textbooks: An Examination of the Works of Harold O. Rugg and Carter G. Woodson,” *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 36, no. 4 (2012): 359-383.
3. Tara J. Yosso, “Toward a Critical Race Curriculum,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* (2002): 98–102

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