


Yes, Race and Politics Belong in the Classroom

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Ten tips for teachers to engage students in difficult conversations

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Last year's presidential-election season and the subsequent presidency of Donald Trump have recentered serious issues of gender, race, immigration, and social class for people in the United States and beyond its borders. Even my own young daughters are musing about these extremely difficult issues. But the issues themselves are not the only areas of concern. The very digressive manner in which people are engaging each other is concerning as well.

Recently, Elise, my 7-year-old, walked into the room as I watched a heated conversation about immigration on a popular national news channel and asked me: "Why are people so mad at each other?" I reassured her that people were not necessarily mad at each other as much as they were passionate about their views on the topic. With a look of confusion and a bit of disbelief, Elise walked out of the room. I knew I had missed an important opportunity—a teachable moment—with my daughter.

—Getty

Middle and high school teachers continue sharing with me that their students, too, are grappling with such issues during those moments of stark opposition on political, social, racial, and economic issues. And while these teachers recognize the potential in drawing on these



areas of dissonance with their students, they struggle less about what they should address than how to engage their students in powerfully constructive ways. They often feel that they are missing important opportunities for students to think, engage with each other, learn, and develop.

Thus, although children of all ages are reflecting on tough social issues, so many opportunities for teachers to draw upon these powerful realities as anchors for curriculum and instruction are lost. Rather than avoiding controversial matters, teachers (and parents) should actually deliberately keep them at the center of classroom instruction. But if teachers aren't properly prepared to engage their students productively, we can actually do more harm than good. With appropriate tools, we as educators have an opportunity to build lessons that connect to students' interests and, perhaps, shepherd them into becoming deeply engaged citizens who work against racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination.

But many educators who recognize the potential power of this engagement do not know how to foster it. How do we support teachers so they can create a classroom environment that cultivates, instead of stifles, difficult discussions about race, class, politics, and culture? Often, the very issues we ignore are the ones on which we should focus the most. And in light of the recent terror attack in Charlottesville, Va., and the assassination of Heather Heyer, race is the toughest issues of consideration yet the most important.

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Here are 10 recommendations for my fellow teachers as they develop a classroom ethos that encourages, advances, and addresses the toughest issues students face inside and outside of classroom:

1. From the very beginning of the academic year, design a classroom ethos that is open to questioning, open to varying perspectives, and encourages discourse. Creating an environment of respect (even when conversations get heated) is essential to encouraging students to interrogate and grapple with tough issues.
2. Reflect on your personal views and positions on race and society. Your goal is not to indoctrinate students into believing or embracing a particular point of view. The goal is not for teachers to push their own agendas, but rather to explore nuance with students to sharpen their analytic and critical-thinking skills that are transferable to other situations. Offer counterviews to students' positions as they participate in classroom discussion; expect and encourage students to do the same. By sharing alternative views, relying on publications from across the political spectrum, and inviting guest

speakers to share their positions on issues, you can support students as they strengthen their own arguments, perhaps shift perspective, or even understand another point of view.

3. Draw from society as a focal point for tough talk. The Charlottesville terror attack committed by white supremacists, recent high-profile police-involved shootings across the country, Colin Kaepernick's refusal to stand during the National Anthem and the subsequent backlash from the NFL, regulatory changes to affirmative action recently reported to be under consideration by the U.S. Department of Justice, ongoing national immigration debates, and the Flint, Mich., water crisis are all current examples of how race might be explored inside the classroom.

4. Identify and centralize the facts, based on evidence from varying sources and multiple points of view. Encourage and require students to explore different sources of information and to consider positions and standpoints inconsistent with their initial thinking on topics.

5. Expect students to draw from a variety of sources, including their own personal experiences and diverse news coverage, in expressing and substantiating their views and positions.

7. Build your own repertoire of skills to support tough talk in the classroom. Be prepared to respond to the cognitive, social-emotional, and affective needs of students as conversations emerge. Build networks to support student needs that fall outside your toolkit by working with school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and others.

8. Recognize and nurture the social-emotional impact of these conversations on students, who could feel very strongly about a topic or issue and could become emotional as conversations develop. Acknowledge and validate these students' feelings and respond to them with affirmation and sensitivity. While acknowledging their feelings, however, do not let students off the hook when they are expressing and advocating hate, phobias, and various "isms."

9. Talk, collaborate, and partner with parents, community members, and school administrators to understand their views and expectations regarding difficult classroom discussions. Develop strategies with those groups—especially families and communities—to bolster and complement discourse inside and outside the classroom.

10. Work toward healing and consider next steps associated with tough talk. Once students have engaged with the issues and deepened their knowledge, help them think about their role in working to build a more just society, provide space for students to heal and rebuild their psychological wellbeing. In other words, what can students (and any of us) do to fight discrimination and create an equitable society for all?

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As teachers, we are under an enormous amount of pressure to teach a curriculum that is tied to accountability systems, such as standardized testing. Thus, it may seem difficult for them to talk about such issues inside the classroom when they worry that such learning and engagement are seen as inconsequential to what they think they're supposed to be teaching. But for many students, the tough social topics are the curriculum of their lives and thus should be addressed inside the classroom. Until we address the toughest of these realities—particularly race and racism—in our schools and society, we cannot reach a democracy that truly is for all.



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