



Considerations & Recommendations for Elementary Teachers when Talking about Race & Racism

While it is important to consider these recommendations for all students, keep in mind that the impacts of racism oppress students of color and lift up white students, which means our attention to addressing these topics with students should be differentiated in age-appropriate ways. We must also remember that each student and family may differ within any group, having their own cultural practices, experiences, and preferences.

Keep in mind as well that students of color, especially Black students, live race every minute of every day. It isn't something that ends with them at the end of the discussion. While white students (and educators) might easily move on, they may not.

Letter to Families

A letter should be sent to students' parents or guardians outlining what students will be doing. Families of students of color, as well as many white families, may be encouraged that these discussions are happening. It is also an opportunity for families to talk at home to their children about these topics and support our work in schools. If you receive any criticism in response to this notification, you may respond with some of the information and phrasing in this and other school documents or you can refer the matter to an administrator. Use your best judgment.

Conversations with Students of Color

It is often helpful to talk to students who might be directly impacted by the discussion before a difficult classroom conversation. Use your discretion about which identity groups may be impacted, and incorporate an understanding that because of the way that we all are socialized, Black students often bear the brunt of hyperfocus that can happen during racial discussions. If help is needed, a member of the Counseling or METCO Departments can assist with your conversation and/or speak with the student(s). Sometimes previewing the lesson may include allowing the student(s) to make recommendations. If possible, have a conversation after the discussion or lesson to check-in with the student's feelings.

Why Differentiate?

When covering the topic of fire safety in an elementary classroom, you likely would preview the content with a student who you knew recently lost his home to a fire with an understanding that this topic might be sensitive and traumatizing. The effects of racism can be just as traumatizing, especially for Black students as anti-Black racism can function in very pernicious ways.

Conversations with Families of Color

Families can assist in helping students of color who may have difficulty in the classroom. These conversations signal to families and students your advocacy and concern for the student. As noted above, keep in mind that no group is monolithic, so use language like, "I am wondering if this lesson will impact your child differently than her peers..." rather than "I know this lesson will impact your child differently than her peers..."

Racial Epithets

There are virtually no circumstances where staff or students should be verbally stating racial epithets or any language that dehumanizes historically silenced and marginalized groups. This is true whether the terms are being used colloquially or being read aloud in a text or quoting media being used within the curriculum, and at the elementary level, there will likely be very few, if any, instances where such language is appropriate within the curriculum. Educators should explicitly state to students that in the classroom environment, no one should be reading these words aloud if there are curricular materials that include them. If reading a text out loud or quoting these words in discussions is necessary, it is appropriate to create euphemisms (e.g., “N-word”) as part of the classroom agreements and norms. Some upper-elementary students may be ready for discussions about the power of these words, so incorporating that into any norm-setting may be a benefit to reaching the goals of a particular lesson or unit.

History of METCO

As a proud member of the METCO program, we must remember that many of our Black students and other students of color are Boston residents. We should teach young children about this program, as well as clarify for them that not all Black students or other students of color in LPS live in Boston. [The Story of METCO: Metropolitan Council for Education Opportunity](#) by Michelle Chalmers, a resident of Wellesley, is a children’s book that explains the history and reason for METCO as a civil rights experience with which children can connect. METCO Social Workers are available to come into classrooms to read the book and answer questions about the METCO program. This book might be a starting point for discussions on race issues.

Students Care That You Care

Relationship-building is invaluable. Finding ways to develop a genuine relationship with students needs to be intentional. Many teachers feel they show students they care; however, data from students of color suggests that is not as common for them as their white counterparts. Differentiation may provide more meaningful opportunities for relationships with students of color.

Make Equity Part of Your Classroom Culture & Norms

This will make talking about equity familiar and relatable when you discuss it in lessons. It also will help when addressing inequities in class. Younger children can easily grasp age-appropriate concepts like “fair” and “unfair” as preparation for these concepts.

Hold Students Accountable

Respond to students’ inappropriate words and actions. When harm occurs--and remember that harm can occur even without students’ knowledge--focus on repairing and restoring your community. Students of color especially will likely take comfort knowing you will stand by them when they are mistreated.

Teach Students to Recognize Microaggressions

Name them when they happen. Help students to understand some of the inadvertent things people do, say, and think that are hurtful and feel like racism to people of color. Like the promotion of any growth mindset, it might be powerful for educators to share the ways they unconsciously hurt others and how they learned from that mistake moving forward.

Don’t Be Indifferent

Tell students your beliefs about race. Stand up for what is right and be a model for your students. Racism and discrimination are unambiguous. “We all belong” is not a political statement in the LPS and neither is the belief that systemic racism is a reality.

Make These Topics Pervasive

When possible, infuse the history of people of color, especially Black History and Black Americans, throughout your curricula. Make a point of talking about these topics throughout the year, as well as during periods of collective celebration like Black History Month. Be sure to balance your discussions about struggles in history for people of color with positive accomplishments and experiences.

Let All Students Express Their Connections

Expose students to contributions by many different cultures and races, and let them respond personally to those things. However, some students’ perspectives may be harmful to others. A student who chants “Build a wall” may be traumatizing for a student whose family recently immigrated here from Latin America. Stress with students our Core Value of “Care for yourself and Others” when promoting empathy and respect for difference.

Notice Feelings

Notice the tone of the classroom. Find ways to check in to see how students are feeling. If things seem to be too emotionally difficult, it may be better to write down thoughts. Students may need the opportunity to pass or take a break. Likewise, take note of your own feelings. If you feel things are getting out of hand, tell students it’s time to pause the conversation and that you’ll get back to it later or the next day. Keep in mind though that pausing the conversation and never coming back to it might cause more damage than letting the conversation continue.

Three Things Black Students Have Said

1. Positive relationships between teachers and students affected academic achievement;
2. Teachers’ responsiveness to students’ personal lives generated positive feelings that led to increase effort in school; and
3. That they preferred teachers who enabled them to actualize their own ideas in completing assignments and in becoming engaged in class discussions.

Resources

- [“158 Resources to Understand Racism in America.” Smithsonian Magazine. June 2020.](#)
- [National Museum of African American History & Culture.](#)
- [“Talking About Race.” Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture.](#)
- [“Speaking Up without Tearing Down.” Teaching Tolerance. Spring 2019.](#)
- [Common Challenges when Teaching Identity. Fall 2020.](#)

References

- [“Let’s Talk about Racism in Schools.” Educational Leadership. November 2016.](#)
- [“Helping Students Discuss Race Openly.” Educational Leadership. November 2016.](#)
- [“10 Ways to Talk to Students about Sensitive Issues in the News.” New York Times. March 2012.](#)
- [“Classroom Discussions on Race: What 5 Students Say They Need.” Education Week. July 2020.](#)