

Beyond Conversations About Race

A Guide for Discussions With Students,
Teachers, and Communities

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INTRODUCTION

How to Get the Most Out of This Book

Let's be blunt: most people are afraid to talk about race. In a study published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, Boston University (2020) researchers present data that reveal most adults in the United States, no matter their race or parental status, have profoundly inaccurate ideas about when to talk about race with children, with study participants citing fear of inflicting their own racial stereotypes on children as reason enough to avoid the subject. In education, the extremes of this apprehension regarding conversations about race range from workshop vendors that alienate teachers and divide faculties on the one hand to complete silence on the other. There must be a better way to have this discussion.

Beyond Conversations About Race invites students, teachers, administrators, and community members into respectful dialogue on some of the most challenging issues facing educators in the 21st century. Although the references at the end of this book provide empirical support for our claims about racism, some of the writers of this volume have experienced racism firsthand, and others have observed it. Our expertise is not in the academic study of racism but in our lived experiences and, most important, our work with tens of thousands of educators, leaders, students, and community members. In the chapters ahead, you will find scenarios that vary by age and grade level. While we understand these discussions can be challenging, we argue that talk about race and the impact of racism is much better held in the thorough and caring environment of the classroom than from the chaotic, unfiltered, and sometimes badly informed sources that students will otherwise encounter. They will hear about race, violence, and prejudice no matter our efforts to protect them from difficult realities. In summer 2020, we watched one rising ninth

grader dissolve into tears as she heard about the murder of George Floyd for the first time, four weeks after the event. Her tears turned to a hot blaze of anger when she asked her mother, “Why didn’t you tell me?” Her parents wanted only the best for her and her siblings—all polite, precocious, and happy. Why mess up summer 2020 with discussions of violent death, screaming protestors, and connections these might have to our own schools and neighborhoods, her parents (and many others) reasoned? You will find the answer to that question in the following chapters, as we seek to guide students, teachers, and parents through the difficult terrain of talking about race.

We will learn, for example, that all of us have biases, including a leading researcher who, as a Stanford professor, eloquently admits not only her own biases but also those of her elementary school child. We will learn that many things, from bus rides to classroom discussions to school assemblies, are not always what they seem. Our goal is not to have the reader agree with us, save for the general agreement that truth is better than illusion and that critical thinking requires not personal criticism but the thoughtful ability to test claims against evidence. The neurologist Alison Gopnik (2016) reminds us that there are scientists lurking in the playpen and stroller, so we need not protect them from the gap between fantasy and reality. Rather, we can, in a loving and age-appropriate way, help them to understand the world around them.

Some readers may worry that elementary school students are too young to have meaningful conversations about race or, more broadly, that race is a political issue, and that politics doesn’t belong in school. But the *Economist* disagrees, arguing that it is vital for open and honest discussions to occur in schools and throughout society. Why? In its clarification call for open discussion, it notes:

A third of black boys born in 2001 will probably spend time locked up, compared with one in 17 white boys. In 1968 black households earned around 60% as much as white households, and owned assets that were less than 10% of those of a typical white family. They still do. (“The New Ideology of Race and What Is Wrong With It,” 2020)

Part 1

Getting Ready for Challenging Conversations

As we review more than four centuries of enslavement, unequal treatment, and the real presence of racist structures, policies, and practices in schools and elsewhere in society, we could at least agree that a discussion is in order. After yet another televised murder of a prostrate Black man, George Floyd, at the hands of police officers, surely, we could agree that this is something we must talk about together. After honoring the command of the U.S. Supreme Court in its 1954 decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that we desegregate schools with all deliberate speed, we could at least have a discussion of why many ignored that unanimous decision. Discussion, after all, is a low bar, and this book will make the case not merely for challenging discussion but for action, from the classroom to the boardroom, statehouse, and halls of Congress. But it all starts with a discussion, or at least it should.

The definition of *racism* is evolving, as dictionary editors are coming to grips with the expanding application of the term. For example, in June 2020, *Merriam-Webster* announced that it would change the definition to include a section on the systemic nature of racism (Hauser, 2020). That section is reflected in its online edition's entry for *racism*:

1. a belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race

2. a) the systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another, b) a political or social system founded on racism and designed to execute its principles (“Racism,” n.d.)

The challenge of this updated definition of *racism* is that it does not absolve those individual participants in a racist system who are not themselves prejudiced. We find this to be the greatest barrier to conversations about race, because when someone claims, “I’m not a racist,” the implication can be there is no further discussion, because to continue the conversation would incorrectly accuse the innocent of racism. But this book is not about guilt or innocence. Rather, as the definition of *racism* suggests, it is about our collective involvement—sometimes beneficial, sometimes not—in an economic and educational system that has disadvantaged people of color.

In 2020, political activist and businessman Ward Connerly (2020) expressed on the influential opinion page of the *Wall Street Journal*, “Some say that America needs to have a conversation about race. I doubt that’s a good idea.” The author has been influential in not only changing the Constitution of the State of California but also pursuing a national effort to repeal affirmative action. Connerly (2020) argues that, in view of the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the election of Barack Obama to the presidency, the victory for Black voting power has been won and no further work is necessary. If, however, you have no fear of discussion and in fact embrace it as a matter of urgent national and global priority, read on.

The first five chapters of this book prepare readers for challenging conversations. In chapter 1, we reflect on why talking about race and racism is so hard. We encounter the resentment and anger so close to the surface in every discussion about race, and how good intentions and the pretense of heroic actions to improve equity can have unintended consequences. Chapter 2 discusses why discomfort is required for critical conversations about race. Chapter 3 considers why the use of scenarios is so valuable as an educational device. Customarily, we use scenarios with small children when we ask “What if?” questions to help them plan ahead. But when we do the same with adults, the scenarios can hit very close to home, leading to either productive, challenging conversations or conversations