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How to Be an Antiracist Educator

Dena Simmons

As a social and emotional learning (SEL) practitioner-scholar, I am fortunate to get invitations to support schools and districts all over the United States. When schools and districts learn that I address **SEL within the larger sociopolitical context**, integrating culturally responsive and SEL practices to ensure equitable student outcomes, some are excited. Too many, however, insist that there is no need to discuss equity or culturally responsive practices; their school population is mostly white. The pushback at these schools reveals an underlying discomfort with talking about race, identity, and difference in our nation's classrooms. I worry about the marginalized students and educators in these schools who are either expected to do the brunt of the race and equity work or who are likely struggling silently.

We cannot afford to wallow in our discomfort regarding issues of race and equity. The Southern Poverty Law Center reported an overwhelming **3,265 incidents of hate or bias in schools** throughout the nation in the fall of 2018 alone. I, too, have experienced racial trauma at many of the education institutions where I've worked or studied. Educators have an obligation to confront the harm of racism. That is why we must commit to becoming antiracist educators and to preparing our young people to be antiracist, too. I recommend five actions for teaching for an antiracist future.

1. Engage in Vigilant Self-Awareness

People who are white or perceived as white have more privilege and fewer barriers to resources than Black people and other people of color. If we do not know our power, we can abuse it unintentionally or fail to leverage it toward antiracism. Constant self-reflection enhances our ability to disrupt white privilege when we see or enact it. Some questions to ask yourself include

How does your identity provide or prevent access to necessary resources?

How does your power and privilege show up in your work with students, take up space, or silence others?

What single narratives are you telling yourself about students, and how does that affect grading, behavior management, and other interactions?

Do you and the academic materials you use uphold whiteness or lift up the voices and experiences of people of color?



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Studies show that Eurocentric values and content dominate U.S. schooling, so these reflection questions are also relevant to educators of color who may have **internalized negative messages** about Black or Brown people.

Antiracist Activity Ideas

To build their antiracist repertoire, students need to be able to reflect on their relationships to power and privilege. Several approaches can help students investigate these sensitive topics as a community.



- Help students build empathy by engaging them in role-playing activities related to characters from literature or history. For examples, see the Zinn Education Project's lesson plans on historical role-plays.
- Study literary and historical narratives with your students that reflect a variety of experiences for people of color, including those of excellence and ingenuity. (Sites like The Root or the social accounts for institutions like the National Museum of African American History and Culture provide endless ideas.)
- Ask students to play the role of social scientists for a week by observing the world with a racial-justice lens. Ask students to track how different racial groups seem to experience the world. What trends, similarities, and differences do they notice? At the end of the week, lead a reflection where your citizen scientists report their findings and generate questions or theories based on the evidence.
- Lead students in a reflection based on Peggy McIntosh's article, "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." The Teaching Tolerance website also has lessons on white privilege and whiteness.

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2. Acknowledge Racism and the Ideology of White Supremacy

When we let our discomfort or ignorance shield us from recognizing our country's racist history and present, we are part of the problem. Failing to acknowledge racism not only erases histories, cultures, and identities, but also ignores ongoing differential treatment based on race. For example, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos **ignored three decades of research** showing students of color are disciplined more harshly than white students when she decided to rescind Obama-era guidelines aimed at discipline equity. In addition, schools and districts have spoon-fed lessons on grit to mostly students of color, suggesting that we must "fix" them by making them grittier so that they can adapt to—rather than disrupt—racism and inequality in schools.

Acknowledging the social construct of race and racism and the ideology of white supremacy recognizes the problem so that we are not harmful in our ignorance and so that, together, we can strive for solutions. For educators of color, the work means continuing to call out racism and recruiting white coconspirators to join in antiracist work.

3. Study and Teach Representative History

No matter what subject you teach, history (including African American history, which is U.S. history) is important. Knowing our country's whole history helps us make sense of how our current education system perpetuates inequity.

For too long, we have taught U.S. history devoid of a true depiction of Black excellence and have focused on erasing the truth of racial oppression and uplifting whiteness. Our curriculum superficially talks about slavery and civil rights (notably, [textbook provider McGraw-Hill called enslaved Africans "immigrants" and "workers"](#)), and teaching practices risk traumatizing Black students by enacting mock slave auctions, slave games, and underground railroad games. Alternately, resources such as Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s [PBS documentary series on Reconstruction](#) or [The New York Times Magazine's 1619 Project](#) provide a comprehensive opportunity to learn and discuss history and race with colleagues and students. The Zinn Education Project and Rethinking Schools also have teaching materials that explore topics like the Tulsa race riots and colonization.

4. Talk About Race with Students

The educators I work with are mostly white (which matches the [lack of teacher diversity](#) on a national level) and often share that they do not feel comfortable talking about race. But when we shy away from open conversations about race with young people, we sow the seeds of prejudice by inadvertently sending the message that something is wrong with people from another race.

To open up conversations with young people, use stories from history and literature as a starting point, and ask students to take on the perspective of a character about whom they are reading. Reading literature and role-playing enhance empathy and other social cognitive skills. Teaching Tolerance's resource, ["Let's Talk: Discussing Race, Racism, and Other Difficult Topics,"](#) includes suggestions for working through discomfort. The *Educational Leadership* article ["Helping Students Discuss Race Openly"](#) also has a great list of steps to begin the conversation. (And the September 2019 issue of this newsletter includes guidance from educator Liz Kleinrock on [how to lead students through challenging topics like race.](#))

5. When You See Racism, Do Something

We have to fight against racism—and other isms and phobias. All students deserve to live and learn in the comfort of their own skin. To combat racism, consider how the academic resources, policies, admissions, hiring, grading, and behavior management practices at your school might be racist. Whom do the practices and policies benefit and whom do they disadvantage? Are Black people and other people of color disproportionately affected negatively by disciplinary, pedagogical, and administrative practices? For example, what hours are family-teacher conferences held? Which families are excluded from these hours? Which students are most disciplined based on dress code or physical appearance? In 2018, a high school wrestler was [forced to cut his locks](#) because the referee argued that his hair was not compliant with regulations. Ask yourself whether a particular "rule" is applied to all people or just to some. Engage in vigilant awareness of your implicit bias to ensure that you are not part of the problem, too.

Most important, when we see racism—whether at the individual or policy level—we must have the courage to act. *White Fragility* author Robin DiAngelo provides [guidance for engaging in gentle but firm conversations with offenders](#) that prevents the defensiveness that race conversations inspire. Share data on specific practices and use stories to humanize the data. Build partnerships with racial-justice organizations in your communities to integrate their work in teaching and learning. Form a taskforce to assess data, policies, and practices with an antiracist lens to disrupt systemic decisions that historically have disenfranchised people of color. Be mindful that these efforts should not be carried solely by the people of color in your school, who are living and struggling with racism on a daily basis.

Shape an Antiracist Future

In his book *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi writes, "The opposite of racist isn't 'not racist.' It is 'anti-racist.' ... One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an anti-racist. There is no in-between safe space of 'not racist'" (p. 9). Teaching for an antiracist future starts with us, the educators. An antiracist educator actively works to dismantle the structures, policies, institutions, and systems that create barriers and perpetuate race-based inequities for people of color. Educating students to see and respect the humanity and dignity of all people should be a national imperative, especially if we want to heal—and have a future—as a nation. **EU**



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