

Fostering A Culture of Respect and Tolerance

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Frequently teachers are told they are molding young minds, the future of our society. That is a tall task, albeit one that should be taken seriously by educators. Within this lies a responsibility to prepare kids for what lies outside k-12 walls, yet classrooms are becoming less genuine by side-stepping, sugarcoating, and glossing over important issues. Education shift must allow for open and honest engagement about controversial topics.

First, educators must understand the district's culture where they teach. Part of the ethos surrounding a school is its diversity. Teachers who choose to approach the history of slavery within their classrooms will do so differently in a more racially diverse classroom. Similarly, a teacher who works in a more rural school that may lack diversity would approach racism more subtly. This begs the question, "Shouldn't a topic like race be treated equally across the board?"

Opinions will vary. One way to teach about current issues within [race and social environment](#) is to focus on the gap in how students are educated from one district to the next, depending on location and economic status. Another current-day opportunity for discussing race in the classroom is the focus of [white teachers educating African American](#) students from [an African American parent's point of view](#).

Second, the fact is that experiences are what shape us; modern society and the media dictate that we have to teach young people how to respect others' perspectives that are different than their own. Questions like Shafer asks, "How do you hold the truth in what you have experienced while holding the truth in what other people have experienced as well?" is an excellent example of an [essential question](#) that can drive an entire unit and create open-ended dialogue in a classroom. The key to teaching tolerance is that the educator must facilitate and lead as a model for the discussion. One must be prepared for conversations that can quickly become heated by frontloading and guessing about the paths the discussion can take and ways to use that as an opportunity to look at all sides of an issue, learn from each other, and be able to agree to disagree. This is what effective communication looks like at its best. Discussing a topic like racial injustice promotes critical thinking when done correctly. It is imperative that students question, process, and reflect. Don't we want to encourage students to think outside of the box, make connections, and delve deeper than the surface? [Setting the tone](#), asking the right questions, and allowing students to have a voice is the first step in successfully broaching a complex topic.

Expanding on the second point of what shapes us as people, using literature to focus on topics of race in a predominately non-diverse district can prove to be complicated. Leah Shafer offers excellent points to help fill in the gaps with [discussion, like questions](#) that include personal feelings. For example, students should recall if they have ever thought about their race. When did that occur, how did it make them feel, and how would someone of another race have felt in that situation? Along with that, creating an emotional connection to discrimination is crucial. All of

us have felt excluded and ostracized at one point, and students can remember what that felt like but also expand that to what that might feel like for someone whose experiences are different than their own. In a racially non-diverse classroom, students may struggle to make those connections; however, as a teacher, they should be encouraged to extend their thought process to an area where they can grasp discrimination, whether based on gender, sexuality, physical capabilities, etc.

As a foundation is created for the lesson, the third step is to tie in the academic curriculum. The beauty of addressing these tough topics with students is that any subject lends itself to the opportunity of helping to explore diverse perspectives. For example, language arts classes can read poems, stories, or novels by writers of different races focusing on how race plays a role in the inspiration behind the writing. A history class could tie in a documentary that illustrates inequality or social injustice. Even a journalism class could examine different news outlets and how the same event might be covered differently. It can even be true of an art class that looks at pieces from different time periods or pieces that show an event that illustrates a form of inequality. Yes, even math can play a role by looking at statistics and [probability of racial bias in the legal system](#).

These strategies can be used with any contentious topic that is relevant. Today's youth has more exposure to the media and people's viewpoints than ever before. It is a school's role to educate students, but it is a disservice to students if they are unprepared to encounter real issues. Students deserve a voice in matters that have, or will, impact them. It is time to open students' eyes to the world around them, and the classroom can be the stepping stone to equip students with the tools they need to find tolerance for all groups of people.

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Anna Brehl is in her 15th year in education. She teaches ninth-grade English in a rural community and was awarded Teacher of the Year in the high school in 2019. Teaching young people and giving them a voice in the classroom has always been her passion. She is a firm believer in being a life-long learner, and her students teach her new things daily. On top of teaching, she tutors students in beginning reading, critical reading, writing, and composition. She plans to collaborate on more educational articles and pursue more educational opportunities.

Jodi Rath is in her 22nd year in education. She currently owns her business MYS ED LLC at www.jodirath.com. She has several educational articles published. Jodi is also writing an educational/memoir book on the impact of trauma on people and how social and emotional learning should be used in the K12 classroom to help all students learn how to cope and survive traumatic situations. Currently, Jodi works with Ashland University as an online adjunct of five courses working with Ohio teachers. Lastly, Jodi is working on writing a culinary cozy mystery series, of which she has completed the first eleven books.