

Facilitating Conversations About Racism - A guide for teachers and school leaders



Facilitating conversations about racism within the school setting is intimidating for many.

Common concerns can include:

- Fear of saying the wrong thing and offending or upsetting someone.
- Fear of making matters worse, not being able to contain a situation.
- Concerns about the difficulty of reconciling different opinions.

Barriers to starting conversations about racism in schools can include:

- Lack of recognition of the presence of racism in the school setting, and therefore no perceived need for these conversations
- Seeing the topic as 'bigger' than the school due to the external influences that contribute to a student's experience of racism.

Why a conversation is needed

Although conversations regarding racism can be difficult, silence and evasion of the subject has been shown to be destructive.¹ When students can name, navigate and process racism, they are given the opportunity to develop resilience.² The most crucial factor in the success or failure of addressing racism within schools is whether there is a genuine and sincere commitment within the school to do so.

1 Kohli, R., Pizarro M., & Nevarez, A. (2017). The "New Racism" of K-12 Schools: Centering Critical Research on Racism. *Review of Research in Education*, 41, pp.182-202
doi: 10.3102/0091732X16686949

2 Ibid

Schools are well positioned to address issues of racism and discrimination in a meaningful way. There are many socio-emotional and civics-based programs already implemented by schools, which can provide excellent opportunities for racism and discrimination to be effectively addressed.

Conversations about racism can complement socio-emotional or civics-based curriculum programs that already exist in your school. Incorporate conversations about racism into any of the following programs:

- [Respectful Relationships](#)
- [Intercultural Capability Curriculum](#)
- [School-wide Positive Behaviour Support](#)
- [Social Emotional Learning Programs](#)
- [Civics and Citizenship Curriculum](#)
- [Personal and Social Capability](#)
- [Ethical Capability](#)



This guide is intended to sit beside the above programs and resources to assist school staff in facilitating conversations with students, colleagues and the broader school community by highlighting key considerations such as:

- Defining the purpose, intention and audience of the discussion.
- Preparing for conversations regarding racism.
- Acknowledging that conversations can be uncomfortable and awkward.
- Responding to strong emotions.
- Implementing self-care within conversations about racism.

Key considerations for meaningful and sensitive conversations

- **Defining the purpose, intention and audience of the discussion**

Given the internalised, interpersonal and systemic nature of racism, it is likely that everyone has had an experience of interacting with racism, or an opinion about it. Furthermore there are likely to be differing views and understandings of what constitutes racism, who experiences racism, and what forms it takes. When addressing racism in schools, it is important to gain an understanding of how students and staff may be experiencing racism, the impacts of these experiences, and what the 'hot topics' or 'sticking points' within the school community may be. This includes a clear understanding of the school's position on racism and a strategic plan regarding how the school plans to acknowledge, respond and prevent racism. For suggestions on how to approach conversations about racism in different contexts please refer to: [Facilitating Conversations About Racism - Navigating common challenges](#)



Check out our **Getting Started** page for guidance!



Terms such as racism, discrimination and power can hold different focus and meanings for different people, so **exploring the key concepts and definitions intended for use**, and making them clear to the audience is an important first step. If you would like to know how to adapt content to different year levels, please check out this [wonderful resource by the Australian Human Rights Commission](#) involving lesson plans regarding racism and related concepts.

As facilitators of conversations about racism, teachers and school staff may find themselves lacking confidence in their capacity to guide such conversations. Furthermore, some teachers may have experienced racism themselves. In such cases, it is important for staff to consider their own wellbeing in relation to facilitating or participating in such conversations. It is important to discuss any concerns with the broader team and/or supervisors to ensure that appropriate supports are in place. Further training on the subject is also a useful way to equip oneself to respond to the sensitive content that sometimes arises within such conversations.

See
**Cross-Cultural
Awareness
online module**



or
**cmy.net.au/
training
for ideas!**

If students are the audience for such discussions, consideration should be paid to staffing throughout the discussions. Inclusion of additional staff such as Welfare Officers, Multicultural Education Aides or Teachers' Aides is recommended so that students can be attended to individually if necessary and to help keep conversations on track. For staff conversations, it may be useful to bring in an external facilitator.

A crucial step in preparation, especially in the case of discussions with students, is the establishment of group rules. This should include an agreement about respectful communication, active listening and confidentiality, as well as agreement on the type of language that can be used – for example agreeing not to use racial slurs or derogatory terms and avoiding blaming language. It is important at this point to reiterate the school's policy in terms of acceptable behaviour and appropriate language. Equally it is important to reiterate what support is available if the conversation triggers any difficult feelings for students or staff participating in such discussions.

Offering suggestions on how to phrase and respond to challenging or potentially controversial comments is a useful way to ensure that the conversation remains open and respectful, such as:

- *“I’m nervous/uncomfortable saying this but...”*
- *“From my experience/perspective as [identity...]”*
- *“I’m not sure if this will make sense, but...”*
- *“Can you help me understand whether what I am thinking right now might be problematic?”*
- *“I’m having a ‘yeah but’ moment, can you help me work through it?”*³

Additionally, it is important for students and teachers to choose the degree to which they feel comfortable sharing within the context of a group. In the instance of lack of engagement with the content, it can be useful to explore why there is reluctance or ambivalence to contribute to the discussion, as there will be important information contained within those answers. Passive options such as viewing videos or listening to podcasts could be a contingency plan. In the instance of lots of dialogue it is important to ensure that everyone gets an opportunity to speak, so allocating further time to continue discussions, or strategies to ensure everyone gets a chance to talk, is necessary.

Establishing group rules and boundaries

(taken from "A Note to Educators" - National Geographic, Special Issue, April 2018)

- Be mindful of non-verbal responses and body language. Safe conversations begin with cultivation of trust.
- Listen for understanding instead of agreement. Maintain respectful language for each speaker across differences in perspective.
- Centre "I" statements when sharing your experience and avoid generalisations such as "they", "we" and "you".
- Ask respectful questions and avoid personal attacks. Focus on ideas, shared community needs and interests.
- Be direct when establishing objectives for the conversation.
- Have students engage in activities to teach content regarding racism and discrimination so they have a shared base for understanding (please refer to [Student Voice – lesson plans](#) for ideas).
- Be an active and fully present facilitator in the room; show your students that you care for them and for what happens in your classroom.
- Do not make assumptions about your students' understanding, experience or background.⁴

• Acknowledging that conversations about racism can be uncomfortable and awkward

The concept of racism can be subjective for every individual and for many it can bring to the surface difficult feelings and thoughts of past and present discrimination. Conversations can result in resistance to, and avoidance of, engaging in dialogues regarding racism in our lives. Acknowledging the potential for discomfort from the outset can be a useful tool in preparing for the discussion. It can validate the experience of the participating student or staff member, and may ultimately reduce tension. It may be beneficial to brainstorm with the group any hesitations or barriers they feel towards participating. Discussion may also be prefaced by an exploration of how vulnerability creates spaces from which to learn and grow.⁵

⁴ National Geographic. (2018). *A note to Educators, in Discussion Guide for Teachers and Parents*. National Geographic, April 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/pdf/race-discussion-guide.pdf>

⁵ Brene Brown. (2010). *The Power of Vulnerability* [Ted Talk]. Retrieved from: https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability

In their publication, *Let's Talk – discussing race, racism and other difficult topics with students*, Teaching Tolerance (a project of the Southern Poverty Law Centre) offers non-verbal techniques to assist facilitators to gauge the comfort levels of their audience.⁶



Thumbs up / thumbs down



Thumbs Down

= Whoa! That doesn't feel good



Thumbs to the side

= Huh? I need some help



Thumbs Up

= I am ready! Let's go!

• Responding to strong emotions

Discussing racism can evoke strong, and often unexpected, feelings and emotions including pain, anger, confusion, fear, guilt and shame. Students may seek to avoid this through distancing themselves from the content, interrupting, distracting others, withdrawing, or making jokes and laughing. Whilst the strategies suggested in the previous sections may help to refocus the conversations and reduce the tension, it is important to plan for an instance whereby students may become overwhelmed and strategic intervention is required. For example:

- If a student engages in offensive and inappropriate conduct it will be necessary to demonstrate a zero tolerance approach by explicitly naming the issue. Establishing group rules, as well as a reminder of the school's behavioural policy, will prevent students from feeling set up and provide them with the opportunity to reflect on, and take responsibility for, their choice of conduct.
- If a student feels victimised or distressed it is important to provide space for that person to decide how they wish to proceed. The student may wish to take a break from the activity or alternatively they may wish to express to the group the impact of such discussions. If a student does become distressed it would be useful to explore with them after the activity how they felt about participating in the activity and whether there is any feedback they could provide on how it could be better handled. In both instances, the value of having multiple staff is illustrated so there is capacity to respond to individuals and the broader group.

In recognition of the difficulty of conversations regarding racism in the student context, it can be useful to have fun check in/check out activities planned so as to lighten the atmosphere before they exit the space.

Check out our **Student Voice** page for **Lesson Plans & Classroom activities**

⁶ Teaching Tolerance: *Let's Talk: Discussing race, racism and other difficult topics with students*. Accessed online: <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/lets-talk>

• Implementing self-care within conversations about racism

Interacting with concepts and experiences of racism can be exhausting for all. A core part of addressing racism is developing strategies for how to deal with its challenges, irrespective of the way in which an individual may encounter racism. The strategies outlined below may be useful for students or staff.

For those who:

Experience racism and discrimination strategies may include:

- Choosing the way and extent to which you wish to engage in actions to address racism.
- Inform trusted teachers, staff or student leaders about your experiences.
- Explore avenues for expression and release, based on exercise and movement, art or music.



Young people share their “**Life-saving Tips**” for preventing discrimination/injustice

Witness or are exposed to racism and discrimination strategies may include:

- Being a proactive ally or “up-stander” – naming racism as you see it, making formal reports and offering support to those who need it.
- Consider whether there are ways you may be participating in incidents of racism and how you can address this.
- Acknowledging the impact that the situation has on you, and taking time to respond to your own needs.

Engage in or are perceived to engage in racist or discriminatory behaviour or actions strategies may include:

- Take time to reflect on the message you are receiving and why you have received it.
- Try to avoid defensive, deflective, minimising or blaming responses.
- Seek support to understand the feedback if you are confused by or resistant to the message.
- Seek support to explore ways to genuinely change your thought patterns, reactions and behaviours.