



PRACTICAL ADVICE ON ADDRESSING RACIAL JUSTICE IN K-12 SCHOOLS: A Q&A WITH GLORIA LADSON-BILLINGS



This summer's racial justice protests were historic in scope and many involved were organized by young people. The protests and the incident that sparked them (the brutal, filmed killing of an unarmed Black man named George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police) shifted public opinion dramatically and brought issues of race to the forefront of public discourse. In addition, evidence has continued to accumulate about racial disparities in COVID-19 contraction, hospitalization and death rates.

Regardless of whether schools resume in person or online this fall, issues of race and racial justice will almost certainly be of interest to many students. How, then, should teachers effectively and appropriately address such concerns, especially as they pertain the systemic and historic nature of racial discrimination and stratification in our country? This summer's protests, after all, were not a sudden and unprecedented occurrence but rather the latest chapter in a long history of discrimination and resistance.

In the Q&A below, National Education Policy Center Fellow [Gloria Ladson-Billings](#) offers practical advice on ways in which the nation's teachers—the vast majority of whom are White—can effectively and appropriately address this summer's protests and other timely issues related to race. Ladson-Billings is president of the National Academy of Education and Professor Emerita at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Her areas of expertise include pedagogical practices of teachers who are successful with African American students, culturally relevant pedagogy, and the application of Critical Race Theory to education.

Q: As school resumes online and in-person this fall, what are some ways teachers can and should attend to the demonstrations this summer against police violence against Black people in the U.S.? How might teachers' approaches differ

for older versus younger students?

A: The work of public school teachers is education not indoctrination, so teachers have to be sure to not approach this work with an agenda—“their” agenda. Instead, teachers need to be asking themselves, “What aspects of the curriculum do questions of policing and police violence address?” One of the legitimate ways to engage these concerns is to ask students, “During our time away from school, what things most concerned you?” They should not be surprised by students offering lots of responses about economic insecurity—having to move, parents losing jobs, food insecurity. However, if questions about policing and civil unrest come up, teachers have a right to probe them . . . always with a curricular justification. For example, in early grades it may be linked to conversations about community helpers. In secondary classrooms, students’ questions may be linked to constitutional rights and the role of law enforcement in democratic societies. In anthropology, we talk about the “grand tour” question as a way to get big ideas out on the table and then allow the questioner to “drill down.” So, another grand tour question might be, “If you could change anything about what is happening in our community (city, state, country, world) right now, what would it be?” This may elicit an array of responses, including big ideas like the eradication of COVID-19 or changes in political leadership. Again, if the response includes issues of police brutality against BIPOC peoples, teachers need to be careful to connect the curriculum. It could be around learning to write an editorial or a persuasive essay. It could be about protests as a part of the US tradition. For younger students, the main concept is “fairness,” and asking questions about what they see as “fair” are in order. Older students can probe the law (e.g. the 14th Amendment, equal protection under the law, and the right to peaceful assembly).

Q: Could you speak to these same questions with regard to racial disparities in rates of coronavirus contraction and morality and other timely topics related to systemic racism?

A: Again, the question needs to come from teachers’ understanding of what students already know. The broad question here might be, “What is coronavirus and what do you know about it?” This work can show up in English, Social Studies, Mathematics, or Science classes. It is important for teachers to determine what factual information students have about COVID-19 and from where they received their information. With younger children, gathering this information gives teachers an opportunity to reinforce improved health behaviors (handwashing, mask wearing, social distancing, etc.). With older students, teachers can also set up a debate on the pros and cons of opening up the economy . . . which types of businesses and why. Once teachers establish a baseline regarding what students know about the virus, they can explore other questions. One option is to introduce data on racial/ethnic inequities in the incidence of contraction of the virus and ultimately, death from it. The question that teachers must raise with students is “Why?” Again, this is an opportunity for teachers to establish a baseline of knowledge regarding what students know and understand. Information in this area falls easily into mathematics and science teaching and learning.

Q: Most (79%) of our nation’s public school teachers are White. But White students in public schools are now a minority. Are there differences in the way White teachers should address these issues with White students versus students of color?

A: BIPOC and White students are entitled to learn about these issues with integrity and truth. None of the typical textbooks will take them up in any serious fashion. This is a grand opportunity to introduce information from recent periodicals and make arguments from a variety of perspectives. A great piece to include is the late Congressman John R. Lewis' [Op-Ed piece](#) that was published on the day of his funeral. Older students can carefully examine the Congressman's letter to discuss what he is asking of them. Students from middle grades and older can write an essay about what they would want people to do to improve society before they passed away. Teachers could challenge students to write a letter to someone of a race/ethnicity other than their own with questions such as, "What would you want someone different from you to know about what you are thinking and feeling?"

Q: How often do teachers in public schools currently address systemic racism? What are some reasons that teachers do or do not bring racism issues into their teaching? When teachers do not address systemic racism, how well do they do so? What are the benefits and risks?

A: Most teachers I know do not address systemic racism. They teach slavery as a purely economic necessity and they teach racism as either an act of "individual, ignorant people" or of a "small group of mean-spirited people" (e.g., the Klan, Skinheads, White nationalists, etc.). They do not look at the systemic way some groups of people have no opportunity to get ahead and the role of governments, laws, and longstanding practices in making this so. I think that teachers do not address it because many of them do not understand it. But, for instance, colleagues who work in social justice mathematics show how the mortgage system disadvantages people based on their group membership. Also, there is now a plethora of films and literature that can help with explaining how the system works. For younger children, *Stamped* by Jayson Reynolds & Ibram X. Kendi is a good place to start. Some high schoolers will want to read the original *Stamped from the Beginning* from Kendi. More important, the teachers themselves need professional development to learn more about the interlocking systems of race, the law, the economy, and the culture.

Q: What are some resources that teachers can use to help them more effectively address systemic racism in the classroom?

A: There are many books teachers can use to understand some of the historical underpinnings of systemic racism. I mentioned [Reynolds & Kendi](#) above. I would also recommend Congressman John R. Lewis' graphic novel series ([March I](#), [II](#), and [III](#)). Students also like biographies, so stories of individuals like Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Bayard Rustin, etc. are powerful examples of people fighting racist systems. Fortunately, teachers have access to a wide array of film/video resources. Films like [Twelve Years a Slave](#), [Selma](#), and [When they See Us](#) are graphic and powerful examples of how the system works against Black people. Older students may also learn from comparative analyses that examine Apartheid in South Africa or racism aimed at Black Brazilians. Teachers should also take advantage of community resources, bringing in community leaders to focus on how these issues have been addressed or even older students or graduates who can share their experiences in the school.

NEPC Resources on Curriculum and Teaching

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