Talking Race, Controversy, and Trauma

How to open space for reflection and conversation amid difficult events

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When the news is filled with racialized rhetoric or violence, teachers need to be prepared to discuss these topics with their students — especially when those students are people of color, economically disadvantaged, immigrants, or undocumented.

It may be tempting to think of your classroom as an unaffected space, but students are going to hear about traumatic events anyway. Many may feel anxious or fearful, making it hard for them to engage academically. And for the students who identify with targeted groups, it can be
“dehumanizing not to have their experiences addressed in schools and by their teachers who they spend so much time with,” says former teacher and school administrator Aaliyah El-Amin, now a lecturer and researcher on educational justice at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

We asked El-Amin to talk about how educators can create space for reflection and conversation about these challenging events — and how they can help students respond. Here, we share guidance and perspectives:

**Helping students process racialized or violent events**

- **Acknowledge traumatic events or circumstances.** Bring up news with students the day after it breaks, even if details or consequences are still uncertain.
- **Process and name emotions together.** Help students identify their emotions through discussion circles or individual writing prompts. Describe your own emotions, whether they be outrage, fear, numbness, or uncertainty.
- **Ask students what they know and what they need.** Some students may have a thorough grasp of what’s going on, but little idea of how it could impact them. Others may feel very affected, but lack a nuanced understanding of the details. Open up the discussion to figure out what students want to know, and let them ask questions.
- **Teach relevant information.** Where possible, integrate current events into lesson plans to explain to students what’s happened. Draw connections among the various forces facing communities of color. If you’re unclear about details, be honest with your students, and work to investigate the details together.
- **Connect students to resources.** Show all students, including those who may be affected by new policies or rhetoric, that their school and teachers are there to help. Connect vulnerable students with local lawyers, social workers, and advocates who can provide them with the assistance they need.

**Empowering students to take action**

- **Remind each student that he or she has a voice that matters.** Children of color may feel marginalized, not only by racism or stereotypes, but because they’re young. Communicate to them that they are not powerless, and that their beliefs are valid and significant.
- **Introduce students to different types of political action.** Make sure students are aware of the ways in which people can protest and resist injustice, such as by voting, marching, calling elected representatives, and writing letters and op-eds. Make them aware of how organizations fight for racial justice, through lawsuits, advocacy work, and grassroots campaigns.
- **Give students opportunities to take action.** Ask students what they want to do to make their voices heard. Show younger students how to write letters to Congress, or encourage older students to figure out which person or organization they can call to advocate for justice.
- **Think local.** As a class, explore the issues that are deeply affecting your school and community, and discuss ways to create change close to home.
Additional Resources

- Resources for educators for talking about race and bias, strategies for leading these conversations at the higher ed level, advice for parents for talking about trauma and community violence, from Usable Knowledge
- Guidelines for discussing controversial topics in the classroom, from the Center for research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan
- Resources for standing up to hate and intolerance, advice on preparing students for difficult conversations, and a lesson teaching different forms of civic participation, from Facing History
- Strategies for educators for preparing for conversations about race and racism, a guide for responding to biased language, and an essay on fostering students’ moral and civic development, from Teaching Tolerance