



TEACHING RACE IN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS

By Charlotte Battiest

Imagine you're teaching your lesson when one of your students asks why the police are killing Black people. How would you respond to the student? To the class? With all the news about marches, changes, and racial injustice, what can you say to your students?

The reality is that many teachers will find themselves in this predicament due to the recent deaths of Black Americans like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others. It's at the center of our nation's attention. We as a society can no longer hide or turn a blind eye to the racism that continues to devastate our country.

In thinking of ways to teach students about racism, Jane Elliott's "Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes" exercise comes to mind. Jane Elliott is an educator, teacher, and anti-racism activist who, in 1968 after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., showed her White third graders this exercise, which positively impacted their lives forever. The exercise labels participants as superior and inferior based on the color of their eyes, allowing the children to experience what being a minority felt like.

How can teachers combat racism in the classroom? Here are some tips:

- Create a safe space. Let your students know that the classroom is a safe space to talk about race.
- Define racism. Allow students to define racism using artwork and poems, and through discussions.
- Discuss definitions. Discuss the different ways students define racism.
- Provide support. Let students know their feelings are supported.
- Reflect/debrief. Provide encouragement and positivity about their experiences.

Teachers, however, also need to be prepared for the concerns and fears students may present during these race conversations. A recent video went viral of a young Black boy playing basketball in his driveway while a police car was driving by. The young boy saw the police car and hid behind one of the cars. The video spoke volumes about how Black children feel when they see police. Imagine what must have been going through his mind: Fear of being seen by the cops. Fear of the cops stopping at his house. Fear of being killed by the cops. It is truly sad, as the police should be seen as protectors of the public, instead of as killers.

Children see what is happening in the world today. They have concerns. They have fears. So how do teachers deal with their students' concerns and fears?

- Allow students to express their concerns and fears openly.
- Invite school counselors to the discussion.
- Invite local police to discussions as part of the solution.
- Involve parents and the community.

We must address and talk about the issues of racism together. Everyone has the responsibility to take part in the discussion, not just teachers. The time for change is now, as we unite as one race: the human race. 🍏



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Resources

Look up these additional resources to develop lesson plans about race:

Jane Elliott

janeelliott.com

SAFE@SCHOOL

bit.ly/SafeRes

Why Conversations About Racism Belong in the Classroom

bit.ly/ConvRace