Confronting Racism at an Early Age

Drawing on lessons learned, a principal offers tips on bringing a curriculum on racism to elementary schools

BY: Jill Anderson

POSTED: August 28, 2017
For almost a decade, teachers and administrators at the Bowman Elementary School in Lexington, Massachusetts, have been working to increase staff diversity and become a more inclusive, culturally proficient community. But about a year ago, says Principal Mary Anton, they realized that teaching children the language to recognize and understand race and bias is an important part of the work of dismantling racism through education. “We can't assume that children will learn this later and be okay,” Anton says.

Working in conjunction with Reimagining Integration: the Diverse and Equitable Schools (https://rides.gse.harvard.edu/), an initiative at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the school developed and implemented a curriculum called Dismantling Racism. Its biweekly lessons — taught in a dedicated block — explore issues of identity, perspective, privilege, oppression, and activism.

“Kids get it, even as little as the first grade. They are more likely to understand than most adults, especially white adults, where the socialization has been that if you mention race, it might get you in trouble.”

Are elementary-aged children too young to broach such complex subjects? Anton says no — the children understand, and their parents are unlikely to give negative feedback. “Kids get it, even as little as the first grade,” she says. “They are more likely to understand than most adults, especially white adults, where the socialization has been that if you mention race, it might get you in trouble. But if we can't talk about it, then how can you come to understand and appreciate each other?”

Learning About Race and Racism

Based on her school’s experiences, Anton offers advice for elementary educators looking to launch a curriculum on racism:

- **Begin with your staff and yourself.** Before bringing lessons about race to the classroom, Anton and her staff focused on creating a more diverse staff and understanding different cultures. “You don't want groups of people who haven't examined their own bias to go off and do this work without being able to think about their own power in the situation,” she says. Educate yourself and the staff on the cultural groups within your school. Understand how culture shapes learning, and how discourse can shape or shut down lessons in school.

- **Assess. Assess. Assess.** Conduct an assessment to discover what you and your staff already know about race and culture. Notice staff's response — what's the energy like, who is reluctant, and who is ready for the work. Consider consulting an organization like RIDES (https://rides.gse.harvard.edu/), which offers tools of assessment to determine where your school may be in this work.

- **Identify the materials that you'll use.** Determine whether your school will use a curriculum that already exists or craft one around your specific needs.

- **Consider the terms and definitions you'll use.** A big decision for elementary-aged children is around language and word choice. The Bowman School decided to use real vocabulary terms, since staff concluded that if students can learn complicated concepts like "metamorphosis," they can also learn "race," "power," and "oppression." Still, she advises figuring out a kid-friendly approach.
Designate support staff. Remember that not every teacher will be comfortable implementing such a curriculum or determining the right words to say to students. Support staff within the school can be called upon to help when needed.

*Integration isn't the same as desegregation. Learn more (https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/08/reimagining-integration) about how to build — and sustain — a truly integrated school community.*

- **Evaluate your classroom literature.** Books provide opportunities for multiple perspectives and conversations. The first step is to review what already exists in your classroom libraries. Make sure there are books that reflect diversity of all kinds, and determine whether certain groups are missing. Think about what the books are saying and evaluate how a book can aid you in a deeper conversation about difference.

- **Figure out how to have conversations in advance.** Books can be a rich gateway to conversations — but how do you actually have that conversation? Lay out the ground rules. Anton says it’s OK to address young children with the idea that “we are going to have a hard conversation about difficult topics.” Ask them what they can do to move forward.

- **Remember that it doesn’t always have to be about race and racism.** Not every book featuring diversity needs to lead to discussions about oppression and privilege. Of equal importance is regular, everyday stories about people from different backgrounds, with different experiences.

- **Keep families informed.** Whether your school uses newsletters, workshops, or meetings to communicate with families, it’s important to include them in the process. Make families aware of the terms and definitions used, as well as the materials in the discussions.

- **Work collaboratively.** If you are a teacher working alone, try to find at least one partner in the school to work with. “There is a real value in being able to talk about what you are doing,” Anton says. “For our staff, it’s been an incredibly powerful and positive experience.”

- **Be flexible.** Expect setbacks and changes to the curriculum, especially as things evolve in your school.

- **Don’t be afraid to get started.** Learning about implicit bias, race, and privilege is a lifelong exploration. Anton cautions educators not to simply push off addressing these issues with children just because there is more work to be done with the adults. It can take a long time to achieve progress, so start small, and remember that it will take time. “There are lots of books to read and resources available,” Anton says. “It’s really important to realize that at some level you just have to jump in, even though it is out of many people’s comfort zones.”

---

**Additional Resources**

Learn more about the RIDES project — and find resources for your school. (https://rides.gse.harvard.edu/)

Read more about what it means to create and sustain a truly integrated learning environment (/news/uk/17/08/integration)
Jon Parker
Thank you for publishing this timely article. I appreciate the difficult job educators have with broaching this matter. Inclusion, informed discussion, and awareness foster positive outcome and growth

Joy Lawson Davis
Thank you very, very much for this practical and timely resource. We have a great responsibility to our children in schools around the world to address racism and all forms of discrimination in our communities, schools and society.

Carolyn Ingram
Thank you! This is right on time. With a declining society with increasingly hate crimes, this should have an impact on many.

Thara Burnett
Thanks for the advice. I've broached the subject with the upper elementary kids. My goal is to use the article as a teaching resource with my little Kindergarten and first grade classes. I want to foster discussion and encourage them to share their thoughts. Finding resources is the tricky part.

Hans Schmidt
Let me know kindly please when you find some good resources.

Celia Johnston
Excellent article. Thank you
A Leader's Guide to Talking About Bias (/news/uk/20/08/leaders-guide-talking-about-bias)

How a binary view of racism can inhibit productive conversations about race in school settings
Tracking Achievement and Inequality in U.S. Schools

How educators can use a rich new data tool to broaden their lens on academic performance