



Supporting Mentally Healthy Conversations About Anti-Black Racism with Students

A Resource for Educators

Ontario students, families and school board staff are navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and the significant global response to anti-Black racism and the Black Lives Matter movement.

While systemic oppression is not new, the pandemic has magnified deep-rooted economic, social and racial inequities. These have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and marginalized communities.

Students and families experienced and witnessed the added layers of poverty; family violence; discrimination; transphobia and homophobia; anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-Asian racism; and barriers relating to disability, including mental illness and addictions. This disproportionately limited their access to social, emotional, and academic supports.

The realities of discrimination and oppression create and reinforce barriers to equitable mental health and wellbeing outcomes. They contribute to greater levels of stigmatization and trauma and can decrease access to appropriate school-based mental health services. That's compounded when students face multiple forms of discrimination and marginality related to their intersectional identities.

The experiences of racism and anti-Black racism are daily occurrences in the lives of so many Ontario students, staff and families. This can contribute to the erosion of individual mental health, as well as the collective mental health and well-being of Black and racialized communities.

Schools are an ideal place for mental health and well-being promotion, prevention and early intervention. Schools are also ideally positioned to dismantle the systemic ways racism impacts Black students, our classrooms, our school, and our communities. While this resource is centered on anti-Black racism, it is important to remember that the impacts of racism are felt deeply by many other communities, and that there may be aspects of these conversations that support related conversations.



As learning communities, we must create spaces to learn about and acknowledge the realities of anti-Black racism and encourage discussion that leads to meaningful action. We should also expect that some students will come to school with the need to talk about this experience, and the impact it has had on them and their families. We need to listen and learn. Because that is the best and only basis for action. This resource offers guidance to educators on supporting mentally healthy conversations about anti-Black racism with students and serves as a call to action and advocacy.



Why talk about race, racism, and anti-Black racism with your students?

In recent years, and increasingly in recent months, we've seen deaths and injuries to many Black children and youth at the hands of police officers and White people. Seen across media channels, this has ignited important protests around the world.

This has reaffirmed the need to acknowledge and take action to end anti-Black racism. Racism is a lived reality for Black Canadians, with devastating consequences for students, families, and communities. It is systemic in nature, as certain systems are put in place to create and perpetuate racial injustice and inequality in the lives of Black people.

Systemic racism is also a lived reality for Indigenous peoples and racialized people in Canada and around the world. It makes daily life, and moving through the world, an unequal, more dangerous and more stressful experience. It destroys individual and community comfort and trust in places, organizations and institutions that should be safe and should equally serve all people.

In all its forms, racism is unjust, and it is wrong. We all have a role to play in confronting these inequities and working to build more equitable and inclusive school communities.

A commitment to positive change requires us to acknowledge and take action to end systemic racism. At the same time, it requires us to continually look inward at our own biases and understand our own positionality. We must recognize the complexity and deep-seated nature of this problem, which itself requires multiple voices and perspectives. Educators are well positioned to collaborate and recognize the importance of engaging with students sincerely about the realities in the world. And we need to act in concrete ways.

When done in a thoughtful, informed and intentional way, engaging students in discussions about anti-Black racism acknowledges and addresses systemic racial injustice. This can help a school community begin to move forward toward greater understanding, mutual support and, ultimately, healing.

"Don't Say Nothing", by Jamilah Pitts

Students pay attention to everything we say and do. They particularly pay attention to our silence. Many black and brown students are educated in school systems and classrooms where they, despite making up the racial majority, are taught how to understand a world by a staff comprised of a powerful minority.

When their teachers choose to remain silent about moments of racial tension or violence—violence that may well touch students' own communities or families—these children are overtly reminded of their inferior place in society.

Students come into the classroom with ideas, hearts, passions, mindsets and understandings about their own humanity. They have been students of the news and their families' stories and experiences without you; they don't necessarily need you to understand certain aspects of the world.

So if you feel that the conversation is too heavy or that the weight of having to end racism is in your lesson plan, humble yourself and relax. It isn't. Your students need you to allow them space, not to fix the world.



When we create opportunities to talk about race and anti-Black racism, it provides students and educators with space to:

- * **Share factual information and reduce the spread of rumours.**

Using accurate information about people, events, reactions and feelings is empowering. Use language that is developmentally-appropriate for students, and ensure the information is based on facts. It is especially important to correct negative statements made or heard in the media about any specific group. Invite students to correct you too.

- * **Express feelings, honour lived experiences and offer validation.**

Model honest, respectful, and supportive dialogue. Believe when a Black, Indigenous or racialized student shares that they've experienced racism, and validate their feelings. Establish a sense of safety and trust within the classroom, so that students can express their own perspectives and respectfully listen to others who may have differing ideas or perspectives.

- * **Acknowledge that students represent intersecting social and cultural identities.**

Recognize that each student represents their own set of intersecting identities. Allow students to learn more about what this means and how this can shape beliefs, biases, experiences and may provide power and privilege. Focus on respecting differences, and how a positive connection to identity builds strength and resilience in individuals and communities. Help White students to recognize privileges granted to them solely because of their skin colour, and how they can use this power to help to dismantle anti-Black racism.

- * **Address needs, concerns and support a call to action.**

Engage students to reflect critically on their own classroom environment, school and community. Learn what microaggressions, microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations are. Identify and counter them with affirmations, and build understanding of their impacts and empathy for those who experience it. Use these moments as learning opportunities to build on student strengths and move forward toward a call to action.

- * **Introduce healthy coping responses and encourage positive social connections.**

Share resources with students that focus on positive mental health strategies: [Student Self Care 101](#); [COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Resource Hub](#).

- * **Share supports that are available to students and notice when some students may be struggling emotionally.**

Share resources with students and highlight the importance of supporting each other: [Student Reaching Out](#) and [Be There \(Help a Friend\)](#). Recognize when students are struggling. Know your school's school mental health professionals and referral pathways.



Reflect, learn, engage and act

Talking with students about racism and anti-Black racism should not occur as an isolated event. It does require us to reflect, learn, engage and act

Like conversations about mental health and well-being, this should be part of ongoing discussions with students so they feel welcome, included, safe to take risks and have a strong sense of belonging within the classroom community. To foster mentally healthy discussions about racism and anti-Black racism, educators must lay the groundwork. Build the [conditions for mentally healthy classrooms](#) so that student and educators can emerge from the conversations feeling included, supported and empowered.

Reflect

Many educators may feel ill-prepared and uncomfortable to talk about racism and anti-Black racism with students. The fear of saying the wrong thing, sounding racist or unintentionally doing harm prompts them to avoid the conversation altogether. Getting students ready to talk about race and racism starts by reflecting on our own fears, discomfort and biases. Self-reflection is an important part of understanding yourself, your identity and worldview, your own beliefs, your unconscious biases, your privilege, and your responses to them. It will help to inform your own position and provide you with some grounding principles to facilitate conversations about racism and anti-Black racism with students. While you may not have all the answers and may make some mistakes, be honest and embrace the opportunity to learn alongside your students.

Learn

As part of the return to school, it is important to recognize that many students will have been and continue to be directly impacted by experiences of racism and anti-Black racism, as well as other significant forms of discrimination at school and in their communities.

- * Educate yourself about historic and systemic racism, specifically anti-Black racism in Canada.

- * Understand and learn about the diverse social and cultural identities of students and families that make up your school community.
- * Be aware of intersecting identities.
- * Recognize that life experiences, emotions and responses may be quite different for individual students, including those who identify with a similar group. Learn about microaggressions, how they are manifested in schools, how they contribute to the deterioration of Black and racialized student mental health and wellbeing, and how they can be addressed with care and compassion and prevented. This will support and limit the negative impacts on students who experience microaggressions.
- * Connect with your school board's equity, inclusion and diversity team to find out what is available for you to deepen your learning.
- * Recognize signs of mental health problems and distress and what you can do to support.
- * Be mindful that those signs of distress may be a result of ongoing experiences with overt racism and microaggressions that students experience at school and in their communities. See [How to identify when a student may need mental health support](#); [ONECALL Desk Reference](#); [Supporting Minds Strategies at a Glance](#).

Engage

Access your school/board or community resources to co-facilitate the conversation about racism and anti-Black racism with your students. Resources can include Black community leaders, Black student leaders or designated staff.

Engage with culturally-responsive school and community mental health and wellbeing supports and services to ensure psychological safety measures are considered and put in place in the classroom. Make sure these are accessible in case you require individual student follow-up supports. Consult with your school principal/well-being team and school mental health professionals to identify other key resources to support.



Act

- * Create and foster conditions for inclusive and supportive conversations in your classroom – ones that focus on knowing your learners, building relationships, strengthening social-emotional learning skills, addressing stigma and teaching help-seeking strategies. See [Creating Mentally Healthy Classrooms Tutorial](#) and [The Mentally Healthy Classroom Reflection Tool](#).
- * Practice [everyday mental health strategies](#).
- * Ensure that students who are connecting remotely are also included and able to participate in meaningful ways with remote supports available when necessary.
- * Enhance your overall teaching tools and materials to reflect diverse Black Canadian histories, leaders, artists, experts, book characters and community figures with diverse and intersectional identities.

Before, during and after the classroom discussion

Conversations about race and anti-Black racism with students may be pre-planned or spontaneously ignited by current events, a classroom subject matter or as part of casual conversations amongst students. Regardless of how the conversations begin, educators need to be prepared to facilitate mentally healthy conversations. Consider the following before, during and after the classroom discussion.

Before a discussion with your class

- * **Emotional readiness to facilitate the discussion:** Ensure that you are emotionally ready to deliver the message. If you are unable to facilitate the discussion, or will require additional support, you may engage with appropriate board and community resources and partners to help. It is important to reflect on your own intersecting identities, lived experiences and knowledge. How will this help support the conversation? Consider what might be missing.
- * **Set up the space:** If meeting in person, consider arranging the class in a circle where staff and students are seated on the same level and can see each other. A talking piece (e.g., talking stick, stuffed animal) may bring comfort and may help with taking turns. If meeting remotely, follow your school board's guidelines. Check with students about how they would like to proceed, e.g., cameras on/off, or using the hand-up feature to indicate that they would like to contribute to the conversation. Inform students how to reach out for support by sharing a contact number on the screen. Carefully plan who will offer the additional virtual support so that you can focus on facilitating the conversation.
- * **Strategic seating:** Consider whether you need a strategic seating plan e.g., proximity to provide additional emotional support (with safety considerations and following social distancing rules).
- * **Alternative space:** Consider alternative locations or spaces for smaller group discussions and individual supports. Think about your students for whom this may be a difficult discussion (e.g., special education needs, prior trauma concerns, language barriers). Provide them with options such as: stay in the classroom, stay in the classroom with supports, participate in the discussion with a smaller group of students in an alternative location, etc.
- * **Prepare yourself for speaking with your class:** Practice a strategy that may help you feel and remain calm (e.g., deep breathing, visualization, rehearsing).

During the classroom discussion

As a facilitator for this conversation, you can play an important role in creating a safe and comforting environment.

- * See sample prompts for educators (below) to help guide the structure of the discussion.
- * See some conversation starters regarding anti-Black racism (below) to start the conversation
- * Acknowledge and validate the range of feelings (see below) to support more difficult conversations and school service pathways.



Consider those and the following tips to help guide and foster mentally healthy discussions with your students.

- * Model calmness (e.g., body language, tone of voice, non-verbal communication).
- * Use straightforward, simple language. In stressful times, processing information can be more difficult.
- * Be mindful of words or comments that may trigger difficult emotions in students who have lived experiences with racism. Respond with care and compassion and consider revisiting the classroom norms to guide the conversation forward.
- * Be mindful of the needs of the students in the class (e.g., English Language Learners, special education).
- * Allow adequate time for discussion.
- * Allow for pauses and silence.
- * Focus on the facts. It is okay to say, “I don’t know”.
- * Reserve judgement and personal opinions. If you feel defensive, stop, and ask yourself why.
- * Present objective and credible information with respect and sensitivity.
- * Provide students with the option to take a break from the conversation should they feel overwhelmed.
- * Monitor students’ responses, both verbal and non-verbal. Allow students who may be struggling to seek more in-depth support with additional mental health support staff. Provide the option to the student of being accompanied by a supportive friend.
- * Call for additional support, if needed. It’s good practice to know the support people available to you before having the discussion.

After the classroom discussion

- * Be observant and check-in with students who may need additional support. See [How to identify when a student may need mental health support](#).
- * Connect students who may need additional support to school mental health professionals See [ONECALL Desk Reference](#) and [No Problem Too Big or Too Small, COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Resource Hub, Kids Help Phone](#), the [Black Youth Helpline](#), and other local, culturally-responsive supports, services.
 - Following classroom discussions, it may be helpful to allow students to take time for personal reflection in a manner that is meaningful for them, e.g., journaling, listening to music, drawing, speaking with a friend or a small group of friends. Examples: Journaling helps students process their emotions on their own terms and at their own pace. Decide whether journals will be kept private or serve as a space for you to dialogue with students by writing back and forth.
 - Drawing can provide younger students with a valuable opportunity for personal reflection and emotional processing. Drawings can be shared or kept private.
- * Pay attention to your thoughts and feelings and try allow yourself time to care for your own wellness, in whatever ways you find most helpful. Learn to recognize when you need additional support. Help is available through your employee assistance program.



Sample prompts for educators

Introduce the discussion

- * “We are going to spend some time today talking about what is happening in the world with respect to anti-Black racism. This may be a difficult topic”.
- * “We are going to spend some time today allowing those who would like to talk about these important concerns going on in the world”.

Explain the Purpose

- * “For us to share information, express feelings, talk about our concerns, what we need, and how to cope and support one another in a healthy way”.

Establish norms for sharing

- * “Before we begin, I want to talk about how we share in this kind of discussion:”
 - “Confidentiality is important. We need to respect the privacy of others. Please keep your phones away for privacy reasons and so that we can all be present in our discussion”.
 - “Everyone will have the chance to speak but there is no obligation to share. Some people may prefer to listen and to learn from others more than speak but can still benefit from hearing what others say”.
 - “Our class discussion will be a structured process that I will facilitate. If you would like to speak with me one-on-one after the discussion, please do. We need to be respectful of the feelings of others. That means we need to use respectful language and be mindful of our statements. We all have different needs. In a big group like this, we need to be aware of how what we say can impact others”.

- “We should remember that we each represent different identities, family experiences and community connections. So we likely also experience bias and privilege in different ways from our peers. That means we can experience the same situation or the same event in very different ways”.
- “We will take the time to listen to one another, show empathy and learn from each other, especially if our experiences are not the same. Each of our stories matter and should be taken seriously”.
- “Today’s discussion will last about xx minutes (insert time required so that students know what to expect). We can be flexible if more time is required”.

Offer in-person or remote support

- * “I know that this information may be difficult for some to hear or even to talk about. It may bring up other memories and bring on strong feelings”.
- * In-person: “If at any point during this conversation you would like to talk with someone, a support staff will be available to speak with you”. (Introduce support staff and indicate where student and staff can go for privacy.)
- * Virtual: “If at any point during this conversation you would like to talk with someone, a support staff will be available to connect with you over the phone at this number”. (Introduce support staff and put number on the screen.)



Some conversation starters regarding anti-Black racism

Making racism, equity and Black lives matter in the classroom

Possible teacher comment	Purpose	Outcomes
“The news about racism and anti-Black racism has been difficult to watch lately, and I’d like to take some time to talk about how it has been for you”.	Admits to the seriousness of the current situation. Demonstrates empathy and offer non-judgmental support.	Acknowledges teacher is not an expert but is willing to help.
“I know that racism and anti-Black racism exist in Canada and I will do my part to do better, starting today”.	Acknowledges the scope of systemic racism on a national scale.	Students will feel that the teacher does not minimize the problem of anti-Black racism.
“What can we do together as a classroom or as a school community to be part of the solution?”	Lets students know they are part of the solution. Invites students’ opinions in what action in the classroom and school community looks like.	Includes students in the process of exploring the issues of anti-Black racism. Ensures they participate in the solutions and demonstrate leadership for a call to action. Students feel valued and that their voices matter.
“I will not make assumptions about how students are doing. I will check in with you to see if you are ok. I want you to know that I am here to help. If I do not know how to help, I will find someone who can”.	Avoids moving on to class activities as usual and therefore dismisses the elephant in the room.	Offers empathy and not moving on with curriculum and business as usual.
“I’m here to listen”.	Demonstrates teacher’s sincere interest in being present for students.	Students feel heard and supported by adult.



Acknowledge and validate the range of feelings

“We each express feelings in a variety of ways. It is normal to feel upset, confused or even angry about what has happened. Some people here might not even know how to feel about it. I have many feelings about it myself. But right now, it is important for me to make sure that you have the information that you need and to try to answer any questions that you might have”.

“Remember that this information may affect each person in this room a bit differently, and that is okay. There is room and respect for all kinds of feelings”.

Address inappropriate comments/redirect

- * “Let’s think back to what we discussed at the beginning of our discussion. We said...”
- * “There may be a range of opinions, but we must be sensitive to others in the room”.
- * “For most of us, hearing too many details is upsetting and can be difficult to get out of your head. I ask that we all be aware of that in our group discussion and remind you that we can have a conversation after the classroom discussion”.

Reinforce individual strengths and the capacity of people to cope with difficult circumstances

- * “We all deal with stress in different ways, what works for some may not work for others. Here is some information...”
- * For younger students: “I will be sending a letter home for your parents to share with them the important discussion that we had at school today, and to let them now that you may want to talk more about it at home”.
- * For older students: “We will make the same information available for your parents”.

Support available to students

- * “Today’s discussion doesn’t have to end here. If you have any other questions or need to speak with someone, you can. Your mental health and well-being is what is most important to us, and we are here to help”.
- * “You may not feel that you need support now, but remember, over the coming days and months there are supports available”. Clearly indicate which supports are available in the school and in the community by posting Kid’s Help Phone, the Black Youth Helpline, and Jack.org resources. Share handout with resources.



References

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