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What Educators Should—and Should Not Do—in Response to George Floyd's Death

By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) on [June 2, 2020 11:52 AM](#)

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(This is Part Two in a multipart series on this topic. You can see Part One here.)

The question is:

What should teachers learn from the killing of George Floyd?

In **Part One**, Antoine Germany and Lorie Barber shared their thoughts.

Today, Dr. Tracey A. Benson and Holly Spinelli contribute their commentaries.

Several more posts in this series will appear throughout the week.

You might also be interested in numerous past posts appearing here on race and racism in schools and how to combat it: **Race & Gender Challenges**

"Educators play a central role in the perpetuation of anti-black racism in our society"

Dr. Tracey A. Benson is an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. His research explores the vestiges of structural racism in K-12 education that continue to impede the academic success of students of color. His book, Unconscious Bias in Schools: A Developmental Approach to Exploring Race and Racism, was released by Harvard Education Press in August 2019:

The law-enforcement officer who has been charged with murdering George Floyd and the other cops who witnessed it were all once students in someone's classroom. How did the teacher of Derek Chauvin, the officer with his knee on the neck of George Floyd, teach him and his classmates about the civil rights movement and the historical oppression of Black people in the United States? What might have happened differently on that fateful day if the educators who cared for Thomas Lane and J. Alexander Kueng, the officers who stood by as George Floyd lay on the ground, had taught their students how to stand up against racism as a part of their socio-emotional development? What would Tou Thao, the officer filmed holding onlookers back as George Floyd cried out for help, have done if his teachers used historical moments such as the murder of Emmitt Till or the beating of Rodney King to help him understand how Black people have been and continue to be the targets of racialized violence?

Educators play a central role in the perpetuation of anti-black racism in our society. All too often, classroom teachers and school leaders subscribe to an ethos of color-mute racism, deliberately suppressing conversations about race and racism, even as the country is in racial peril. Kids want to talk about what they see and how they feel, but educators, especially White educators, sacrifice student learning about racism in society because of their personal discomfort. However, what we often do not realize is that the very color-mute racism we perpetuate as educators is a direct result of the racially illiterate teachers who taught us.

The reason adults are racially illiterate, struggle to talk openly about racism, and have an intense fear of being labeled "racist" is because we don't teach racial literacy in our schools ... we teach racism. We teach interpersonal racism when we act on our biases and treat White students better than students of color. We teach structural racism when we accept the barriers that prevent students of color from enrolling in honors and AP classes. We teach cultural racism when we use a White-centric curriculum that only talks about people of color with relation to times of struggle and ignores vital contributions people of color have made to this country. We teach White liberal racism by treating racist incidents, like the killing of George Floyd, as "bad apple" anomalies, rather than a product of our racist society.

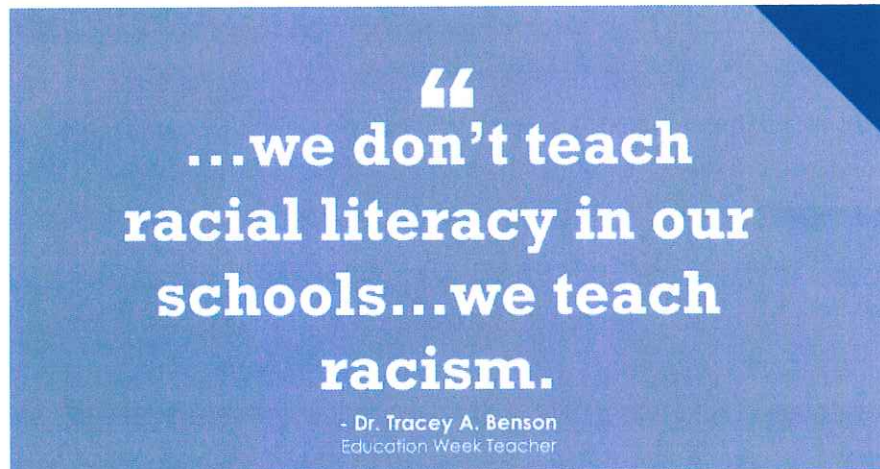
Racism is foundational to the United States and continues to plague our society in innumerable ways. The civil unrest we witness time and time again after yet another killing of an unarmed Black person is, as Martin Luther King said, "... an expression of the unheard." These trends will not be legislated away. It will take a concerted effort from a majority of society to combat the stranglehold racism has on our country.

So, what can educators do?

First, what not to do: 1) Express on social media sentiments of "heartbreak" and "sorrow" and be done with it. Expressions of personal feelings are nice but don't make change. 2) Absolving oneself of responsibility because of lack of know-how. If you are not actively anti-racist, you are directly contributing to racism in society. 3) Reach out to your colleagues or co-workers of color to "check on them" as your sole act, especially if you have not shown up for them before during the litany of previous acts of racism in society. Patronizing for the purpose of self-gratification is irresponsible.

What to do: 1) Pick up literature to get a better understanding about the legacy of racism toward people of color in this country before attempting to enter into conversations or take action. Good intentions are not a substitute for ignorance. It is amazing how folks can Google how to make face masks or homemade bread but never think to Google how to fight racial bias or be an anti-racist. 2) Make a deliberate plan of how you will disrupt racism within your circle of influence. There are plenty of opportunities in our schools and school communities to address vestiges of racism (learn where these areas are by reading literature). 3) Resist the urge to be color mute. After you educate yourself about how the legacy of racism contributes to contemporary racism and anti-black violence, create deliberate spaces for your students to discuss these topics in your classroom.

Our collective discomfort is a direct result of the legacy of color-mute racism in schools, which has left the vast majority of us well-meaning, caring, invested educators racially illiterate. All of the perpetrators who held George Floyd in custody were students once in someone's classroom. It is our responsibility to eradicate racism within our circle of influence. Our actions in our schools, especially in schools without a single student of color, should be guided by our desire to allow our students to build a more racially just society. Silence robs our students of a better future. To all of my fellow educators, please read, learn, do better.



"We must examine our pedagogical practices"

Holly Spinelli is an active member of the National Council of Teachers of English's Committee Against Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English, who began her career as an English teacher and student-rights' activist in New York City public schools and continues this work in a public high school in the Hudson Valley of New York and as an adjunct instructor at SUNY Orange County Community College:

The death of George Floyd is not the first killing of an unarmed black man at the hands of uniformed white men, but his is the one that, despite a long documented history of violent crimes committed against the black community in this country, seems to have awakened folks, namely white people, from a sleepy, complacent existence to one of questioning and action. So, what should teachers learn? Teachers, especially white teachers, should learn that it is time to educate themselves and the other white folks in their homes, neighborhoods, and school communities about their privilege in this country and then follow up by using that privilege to take action against the unjust systems that target, harm, and in extreme cases, murder black folks and other IBPOCs (Indigenous, Black and People of Color). White educators need to do this even if, and especially when, it comes at a cost to our personal security and our personal gain.

We must examine our pedagogical practices: the language we use, the texts and materials we present to our students, and the curriculum we build to see how we can change them to be culturally inclusive, responsive, and anti-racist. As educators, we must continuously work toward becoming agents of positive change through self-reflection, education, and allyship with our IBPOC communities. Educators need to familiarize themselves with the history of systemic oppression and institutional racism in this country, but they must do so together and not by asking their IBPOC friends, neighbors, community members, and colleagues to do the work for them. This is a time for white educators to step away from the sidelines, to conduct their own research, and to begin doing the work. The safety and future of our schools, students, and communities depend on it.

George Floyd's death amplifies Angela Davis' message that, "In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be antiracist." Educators need to do the work to become anti-racist and to create anti-racist educational spaces. The outdated tradition of teacher "neutrality" on issues of racism and human-rights violations is complicit with upholding antiquated, racist, sexist, classist, oppressive systems.

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We need to speak up. We need to teach ourselves, each other, and our students how to identify, engage, and dismantle racism and oppression within ourselves and among those around us. Educators' silence on issues of racism, bias, and oppression has never been and can no longer be acceptable. Silence aids white supremacy. Silence aids racism. Refusing to acknowledge the black community's centuries-long pain and suffering at the hands of racist and oppressive systems in this country sends a clear message to our students that it is OK to ignore these issues and to continue with life as it is. This is a privilege that can no longer be ignored. It is a privilege that needs to be checked. Not doing so is an injustice to education and an injustice to all.

Steps You Can Take in Your Classrooms and Within Your School Communities:

- Amplify and study voices of IBPOC authors and content providers.
- Cite IBPOC authors and content providers when you include their work and ideas in your PD sessions or in any other materials you share with others.
- Be self-reflective. Ask yourself about any past harms you may have intentionally or unintentionally caused. Recognize these and fix the behaviors so you and your school community can move forward. Ask: *Who was harmed? How were they harmed? What can I do to make positive changes moving forward? How can I make sure I do not make the same mistakes?*
- If you make a public error, make a public apology.
- Challenge school or district policies that discriminate/target/police students of color (hair policies, dress codes that include hoodie or hat policies, etc.).
- White educators: Talk to each other about anti-racism and educate yourselves and each other on how to take well-informed, actionable steps.

Here are resources to help:

- ***The AntiRacist Teacher Reading Instruction Workbook*** by Lorena Germán
- ***This Book is Anti-Racist: 20 Lessons on how to Wake Up, Take Action, and Do the Work*** by Tiffany Jewell
- ***Between the World and Me***, by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- Blogpost "**Being an Anti-Racist Educator is a Verb**" by the National Council of Teachers of English Committee Against Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English
- Blogpost "**There is no Apolitical Classroom**" by the National Council of Teachers of English Committee Against Racism and Bias
- ***How to Be an AntiRacist***, by Ibram X. Kendi
- ***The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*** by Michelle Alexander
- ***White Fragility*** by Robin DiAngelo
- **Printable PDFs and Classroom Materials** from the National Council of Teachers of English Committee Against Racism and Bias

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doing the work.**

- Holly Spinelli
Education Week Teacher

Thanks to Dr. Benson and to Holly for their contributions!

Please feel free to leave a comment with your reactions to the topic or directly to anything that has been said in this post.

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at lferlazzo@epe.org. When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it's selected or if you'd prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind.

You can also contact me on Twitter at [@Larryferlazzo](https://twitter.com/Larryferlazzo).

Education Week has published a collection of posts from this blog, along with new material, in an e-book form. It's titled **Classroom Management Q&As: Expert Strategies for Teaching**.

*Just a reminder; you can subscribe and receive updates from this blog via **email** or **RSS Reader**. And if you missed any of the highlights from the first eight years of this blog, you can see a categorized list below. The list doesn't include ones from this current year, but you can find those by clicking on the "answers" category found in the sidebar.*

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