



We All Have a Race: Addressing Race and Racism

Description

Talking about Race and Racism often makes people uncomfortable and even angry. It can be quite difficult to get the conversation started and even more difficult to facilitate the conversation once it has begun. This lesson plan offers a very basic introduction to these topics by allowing students to think and learn about the basic meanings of “race” and “racism,” to discuss race and racism in their own experience and lives, and to learn some basic skills necessary to being allies with people of other races. This is *not* a comprehensive lesson. Teachers are encouraged to set up and maintain firm ground rules of respectful conversation, to plan for future lessons on this topic, and to encourage students to ask questions while being clear that not all questions about race will be answered or even discussed during this lesson.

This lesson plan takes longer than the first two lesson plans in our 2006-2007 Racebridges for Schools series (<http://www.racebridges.net/schools>) and should be taught over one-and-a-half or two class periods. Alternatively, some of the handouts could be assigned as homework so that the discussion could take place during one class period.

Purpose

- To Define Race and Racism
- To Examine Race and Racism in the Lives of Students Today
- To Equip Students with Skills to be Allies of People of Different Races

Outcomes

By the end of this lesson, each student will

- Be able to define “Race” and “Racism”
- Have examined some of the ways racism works in contemporary society
- Know basic tools for acting as allies

Materials

- Teacher Instructions
- Handout #1: Addressing the Myths of Race
- Handout #2: Racism Today

Lesson Plan

Outline of Activities

1. Introduction (5-10 minutes)
2. What Race are You? Addressing the Myths of Race. (10-15 minutes)
3. Racism v. Prejudice (5 minutes)
4. Racism Today (15-20 minutes)
5. Acting as Allies (10 minutes)



Teacher Instructions

1. Introduction

Today we're going to talk about race and racism. These are huge topics; they are also controversial topics. So before we begin, we need to agree about how to interact with one another during this time; we also need to understand that we will *not* be able to discuss everything we want to discuss because of time. In fact, I know there will be so many questions to ask and comments to make that we're going to devote space just to recording the topics we *won't* be able to discuss!

Identify a student who will act as recorder during the discussion sections of this class who will write down on the board or on a flip chart all the topics that are raised that can't be addressed during this class period.

You may already have rules for respectful conversations; if so, please remind students of those rules. If not, use the following.

First, let's agree on how we're going to talk to one another today. What are some rules we can agree on?

Take answers from the students and have the recorder write them on the board. Look especially for answers, such as "listening without interrupting," "positive body language," "no side conversations," "not 'correcting' others," "raising hands to make comments," "keeping our conversation confidential," "not reporting to people outside of class what was said inside class," "speak for yourself, not for another or your own ethnic group," "use 'I' statements," etc.

Great! Let's make a special effort to stick to these rules today. As you know, talking about race and racism requires us to be even *more* respectful and generous than we usually are because this topic often causes people to become quite passionate, even angry, and because it's so easy to hurt people's feelings while talking about race.

One of the first things I want us to agree to, besides following the guidelines we just listed, is that no one here is *intentionally* prejudiced or racist and that everyone here probably has good intentions. So, if someone says something that you find surprising or hurtful, remember that he or she may have misstated his or her opinion, may have wanted to ask a genuine question in a safe environment, or may not have known that what he or she said would cause any hurt.

Finally, as I said above, there is no way we'll be able to cover everything there is to say about race and racism today! So that we can honor everyone's thoughts and questions, I'm going to have one of you act as a recorder who will write down our ideas so we can see just how complex and complicated this topic is and perhaps return to those questions and ideas later.

2. What Race are You? Addressing the Myths of Race.

Let's begin by thinking about race. On the chart I hand out, take some time to think about what race you are, how you know that, and how you define





race.

Pass out Handout #1. Allow students 5 minutes to complete it. Don't collect it, but have a brief discussion, during which students share their answers.

You've heard people describe themselves in a number of ways, such as "white," "black," "Hispanic," "Latino," "African American," "Caucasian," etc. We have a lot of different labels to describe race but we really don't have a scientific way to define it yet. Scientists have tried to pin down and differentiate races by their different physical expressions, such as hair type and skin color, and by genetic differences, but they often find that there is more variety within a so-called race than there is between two races. Today, many scientists—from biologists to cultural anthropologists—are unwilling to say that race is a biological reality; rather, they argue that the idea of race is a *cultural one*, one that we humans create and maintain.



It is true that as we become more and more sophisticated with the study of genes that some scientists think we may find genetic types, but even those don't always fit what we think of as race today. For example, they tend to divide races by continents, finding types particular to the Americas, Africa, Australia, etc., but that certain groups we think of as a "race," such as Latino/as are often a mixture of two or even more races or are better defined as a cultural group that shares a language and/or a culture more than racial characteristics. And of course, we often use national terms to describe people's race, such as European or Australian, but when we think about it, we realize that those nations contain people from many different countries of origin, who look very different, and who often speak different languages.



If you want to be overwhelmed with information, try Googling "What is race?" You'll find an unbelievable range of answers!



While this is all very important to know so that we don't get caught in the idea that "biology is destiny" or that what "race" we are necessarily determines who we are, we all know that race and racism exist in our lives because humans act as if there are races, we all claim a race—or many races!—and a culture to go with that race, and people often get treated and experience life differently based on their race.

3. Racism versus Prejudice

Before we continue with our conversation about how having "races" often leads to "racism," I'd like to offer a definition of "racism" that we can agree on. **What are some of the characteristics of racism?**



Take answers for a brief period; look especially for answers, such as "discrimination," "prejudice," "treating someone differently because of their skin color," etc.

Good! The one point I want to make here is that prejudice and racism aren't identical. Anyone can have a stereotype about another group, and a person of any race can dislike a person of another race. Anyone can be prejudiced against any group of people. Of course, remember that we all have the power to control our words and actions even if we can't control our thoughts!



Racism, on the other hand, can also be individual, but more importantly, it can be institutional and systemic. In other words, racism isn't only about

how one individual feels about another individual; rather, it affects whole groups of people in real ways by limiting their opportunities in education and employment, the housing market, the banking industry, while shopping, and so forth. Racism doesn't just involve an individual's preferences and prejudices, it also involves power and time. ¹

Prejudices must have developed and hardened over time so that entire groups of people have stereotypes about another group of people that now seem logical, normal, and right. At that point, people stop questioning those prejudices. Then the group in power often ends up enforcing those stereotypes in a way that limits the access of the other group to the benefits of the culture.

For example, a little over a hundred years ago it was considered scientific fact that women would be physically injured by studying the same subjects as men at college because women's brains and bodies were just too delicate. Because people believed that, most colleges did not accept women, and there were colleges just for women that taught subjects deemed suitable for women, such as literature, the arts, and music. Over time, these colleges offered more and more rigorous studies, including math and sciences. And slowly people came to see that women could handle studying the same things as men. Still, it wasn't until 30 years ago that many of the Ivy League colleges finally admitted women! Now, during this time, women may have had stereotypes about men, but they didn't have the power in society to affect the lived reality of men: for example, they weren't in the position to limit their access to universities or jobs.

So, for this class, think about prejudice as a more individual, more one-to-one experience, and racism as a more systemic and societal experience, a more group-to-group experience.

4. Racism Today

Now I want to give you some time to discuss where you see and/or experience racism today. I'm going to put you into small groups and ask you to complete the handout I give you as a group. We'll discuss your answers when you are done.

Place students in small groups (3-4 students each) that you choose, pass out handout #2, and assign a recorder. Allow 7-10 minutes to complete the handout and then take answers from the group, distinguishing between prejudice and racism. End by discussing whether racism is better and/or worse now. You may want to point out that in some ways it is better and in some ways it's worse. For example, we now have laws on the books that protect people's rights, but racism has "gone underground" so it's harder to address.

5. Acting as Allies

You may be wondering after this conversation what you can do to stand up to racism or even to be more thoughtful to people of races and ethnicities and cultures different from your own.

Becoming a culturally sensitive, anti-racist person takes a lifetime of work

¹See Susan O'Halloran's definition in *Kaleidoscope: Valuing Difference & Creating Inclusion*, a curriculum for junior and senior high school teachers.





since we all are raised with prejudices and stereotypes about people who differ from our own group, but there are some ways to begin. Does anyone have any suggestions for being more sensitive or even acting as an ally to other groups?

Take suggestions for a few minutes.



Great! It's so important that you start thinking about ways to be anti-racist and to work as allies with people who are different from yourselves.

Let me suggest a few other ways to be sensitive to other races and cultures and to act as allies.



- One of the most obvious is to speak up when someone says something racist. Don't shame the person but just state that you are uncomfortable when people stereotype others.
- When you hear or think something about another race or culture, try "turning it around" and saying it about your own race or culture. If it sounds weird or wrong about your culture, it's probably a stereotype about another culture. For example, you might hear someone say something like, "No wonder that kid did well on the test. He's Asian. All Asians are good at math." Turn that statement around and imagine something that *all* white or black or Latino/a students do well. Would you ever say, "No wonder that kid did well on the test. He's white. All whites are good at science."
- Don't make assumptions about what people of another race or cultural like, think, or want to be called. When you have a question, ask. For example, some people prefer to be called "African American," others "black," and others "people of color." When in doubt, ask your friend or acquaintance what his or her preference is.
- The corollary to the above is not to put someone in the place of speaking for his or her entire culture. Imagine if someone asked you to speak for all teenagers! Now imagine speaking for your entire race, nation, or language group. You can see that that puts someone into a difficult position. Instead, focus on each person's individual experience.
- Finally, just as you wouldn't expect one person to speak for an entire culture or race, you shouldn't speak for another's race and culture. You should allow a person from that culture to speak as one member of that culture. Focus on speaking about your own experience.
- Be aware of racial stereotypes in the media. For example, you might notice that African-American men are allowed to play only limited roles on television and in movies: they can be gang members or athletes. You might also notice that women who are



meant to play romantic leads must be slender, young, and light skinned, no matter how old the leading man is!

- Finally, another way to be a true anti-racist and an ally is to continue to have hope that we can live together, that people of different races not only can, but should, live and work and play together in harmony and happiness. There are places where this happens. In Brazil and Cuba people of different skin tones interact with ease. In many of our political movements in the U. S. we have been able to work together, across race lines, to work for the common good.
- Remember, as Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in 1967, "I cannot reach fulfillment without 'thou.' The self cannot be self without other selves. Self-concern without other-concern is like a tributary that has no outward flow to the ocean."





Notes to Teachers:

The **bolded** text can be read out aloud and followed word for word; however, you may want to read over the material a few times so that you are comfortable putting these ideas into your own words, in the way in which you normally talk to your students.



As noted above, talking about race and racism is challenging because these topics tap directly into emotions. White students may act in a defensive manner because they believe they are being blamed for racism, while students of color may act in an angry manner because they have lived with racism and feel others don't understand or, worse, don't care about their experience. Teachers must be prepared for the range of emotions, issues, and questions that will be raised and be prepared to guide the conversation firmly while being willing to engage in the "messiness" of the conversation. The best preparation is to read about cultures other than one's own and to read about race and racism. The resources below are an excellent place to start. Reading even one of the books below will help a teacher feel much more comfortable facilitating this lesson plan.



Consider turning this into a longer project:

- Split the class into small groups and have each small group research one of the questions or topics raised during discussion that you didn't have time to address. Have presentations on these topics later in the semester.
- Read one or more chapters from the books on the resource list and hold further discussion or have students write book reviews or position papers on what they read.
- Buy a copy of the curriculum *Kaleidoscope: Valuing Difference & Creating Inclusion* and teach diversity in a more in-depth way.
- Watch one of the videos listed in the resource list and discuss it in class.



Resources

Books

Kivel, Paul. *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*. Philadelphia, New Society, 1996.

Written by a white man and primarily for a white audience but useful for people of all backgrounds.

O'Halloran, Susan. *Kaleidoscope: Valuing Difference & Creating Inclusion*. Available at www.susanohalloran.com.

A two-level curriculum for schools about diversity, race and dealing with difference.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

Written by an African-American woman for a diverse audience. Focuses specifically on race and racism among adolescents.

Videos

Lucasiewicz, M. (Producer). *True Colors*. Northbrook, IL: MTI Film & Video, 1991.

An ABC video with Diane Sawyer that follows two discrimination testers, one black and one white, as they look for jobs and housing and try to buy a car. 19 minutes.

Reid, F. (Producer/Director). *Skin Deep: College Students Confront Racism*. San Francisco, CA: Resolution/California Newsreel, 1995.

Examines a multi-racial group of students discussing race and racism;



demonstrates the possibility of changing attitudes through dialogue. 53 minutes.

We All Have a Race: Addressing Race and Racism Handout #1

Addressing the Myths of Race



Directions: Answer the questions below to the best of your ability. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers.

What race are you?

How do you know you are that race? Why do you use that term to describe your race?



How do you define race?



How do you identify a person’s race? What characteristics determine a person’s race?



We All Have a Race: Addressing Race and Racism Handout #2

Racism Today

Directions: Now is your chance to talk about your own experience with race and racism. Discuss times you have seen or experienced discrimination based on race. Fill in the following chart as a group. Once you write down an example of people being treated unfairly, identify whether that is an example of prejudice or of racism. When you finish with examples, answer the questions below.

Example of Discrimination Based on Race	Is this Prejudice? Why?	Is this Racism? Why?



1. Do you think race is more or less important in your lives than in your parents? Why or why not?