Race & Ethnicity in the Classroom

**why** it’s important and **how** to talk about it

**DIVERSITY IN THE UNITED STATES**

Ethnic-racial diversity is in your classroom, regardless of what you might see. Perhaps you teach at a school in Queens, New York and are reminded of diversity, and its role in our students lives on a daily basis (one of the most statistically diverse counties in the country). Maybe you teach in a suburb of Pittsburgh and notice very little racial diversity in your student body (one of the least diverse counties of the country). Regardless of what your classroom looks like, diversity, and race relations are an essential topic in every school room.

The importance of race in our society is articulated through the news, pop-culture and social media and cannot be ignored. In the United States, a country growing more diverse every year, it is imperative that we prepare our students to have a healthy relationship with their own identity as well as with how it fits within the broader context of society.

*Generation Alpha, those born after 2013, will be the first minority white generation in the United States.*

**DISCRIMINATION + ITS EFFECTS**

The vast majority of each and every minority group in this country has experienced discrimination due to their ethnicity and/or racial identity. What is equally as alarming is that at the exact moment in which young people are likely to be aware of experiencing racial discrimination (10 years old) they are developmentally able to understand the biases and social consequences of discrimination. The negative effects of ethnic-racial discrimination have been documented across all four major ethnic-racial minority groups in the United States: Black, Latinx, Asian American and Native American. Perceived ethnic-racial discrimination has been linked with the following major indicators of adjustment:

- Mental Health
- Academic Adjustment
- Behavioral Adjustment

It is imperative that we, as educators, do what we can to protect our students from the effects of discrimination and prepare them to live and flourish in a country that is increasingly diverse. Students of ethnic-racial minority and majority groups are at risk of experiencing and/or participating in discrimination. Recent studies have pointed to one important protective measure that could alleviate the harms of discrimination and help promote positive behavior and achievement: *ethnic-racial identity.*

**Diversity Growth in U.S. American Communities**

97% of U.S. Americans live in an already diverse community or a community that is growing more diverse each year. Just 3% of the country did not experience a growth in racial diversity from 2000-2014.

**Percentage of Adolescents Who Have Experienced Ethnic-Racial Discrimination by Group**

*Based on findings from a review that included 26 studies conducted across the U.S. Though precise data were not found for Native American adolescents, there is qualitative evidence to suggest that discrimination is experienced by the vast majority of Native American youth in the United States.*

**how:** *ethnic-racial identity*
WHAT IS ETHNIC-RACIAL IDENTITY?

• Ethnic-racial identity (ERI) is an important aspect of all student’s identity - minority and majority groups included. ERI includes the self-conception of one’s ethnic heritage, one’s racial identity and the significance that these identities might hold throughout one’s life. It includes one’s own opinions and feelings toward their own ethnicity and race. [6]

• The formation of ERI typically begins with adolescence and continues to develop throughout one’s life, with major milestones likely to occur throughout young adulthood. The importance of adolescence for ERI is tied directly to the developmental capacities of adolescence, namely their ability to conceive of broader social systems and existing inequities, as well as the formation of their moral and social capacities. [7]

• ERI has proven to be a protective measure for adolescents in the face of discrimination. For all ethnic-racial groups, white students included, ERI development can be considered a positive and necessary process for healthy adolescent adjustment. [6]

HOW IS IT MEASURED?

In recent decades, researchers have narrowed their understanding of the formation of ERI into two categories: process and content.

The content of ERI includes four main components:

• affirmation: feelings towards their ethnic-racial group.

• public regard: how positively one believes their ethnic-racial group is perceived by others.

• centrality: the importance one places on their group identification.

• salience: how relevant their race or ethnicity is to their lives.

The process of ERI development is made up of two separate dimensions: exploration and resolution.

• exploration: engagement in activities and thoughts that increase one’s understanding of the role of their ERI.

• resolution: one’s decision surrounding how important their ERI will factor into their own identity. [6]

WAYS TO PROMOTE ERI

1. SELF-REFLECTION

In order to help students foster their own ERI, adults and teachers must do the same. Without understanding the role in which ERI affects your perspective and the way others perceive you, mentors and adults will likely be less capable of conducting healthy and honest conversations amongst students. [9]

2. TALK ABOUT IT

Do not shy away from tough conversations. Adolescents can and will recognize diversity, injustices and social inequalities. Providing a safe space for students to digest these experiences and perceptions will allow students to develop healthy communication skills, in collaboration with their peers. [6]

3. HELP STUDENTS DEVELOP THEIR OWN IDENTITY

For students to engage in developing their ERI, in a healthy and productive manner, adults must understand the specific components that contribute to ERI development. Providing students safe places to explore their identity (through developed curriculum or sanctioned conversations) can ignite interest and curiosity within adolescents. [6]

4. HONOR BOTH: AFFINITY & DIVERSITY

Research points to the values of diverse environments for ERI development. Having said that, it is equally as important to allow students the opportunity to talk within their affinity groups. The shared experiences of affinity groups can be protective, just as the differences of opinions and perceptions can illustrate the intergroup diversity within affinity groups. [10]

BIBLIOGRAPHY


FOLLOW-UP RESOURCES


• How to Have Conversations with a Diverse Group of Youth: “Youth Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity.” Youth Civil Rights, youthcivilrights.org/youth-dialogues-on-race/

• Classroom Resources Built By Teaching Tolerance: https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources


• Social Studies Curriculum: “Facing History and Ourselves” https://www.facinghistory.org/