

You may be wondering ...

What should I do if I'm a White educator and a student of color says that I shouldn't be teaching the Identity Project because I'm White and I can't understand their ethnic-racial identity or experiences?

Here we highlight some key talking points (in no particular order), some background research to keep in mind, and some potential conversation starters to open and continue a dialogue with your students.

Talking Points

What Does the Research Say?

Conversation Starters

Validate



Your student is not in the wrong. Research shows that students of color benefit when they have educators and mentors who look like them.¹ However, there is a long and unfair history of White educators making decisions about what's "best" for students of color. Therefore, acknowledging racial biases in the education system can be one important step to better understand and reduce ethnic-racial disparities in education.²

"You're right. I will not be able to know your experiences..."

"That's a great point. My role in this process will not be to give you answers about your own identity, but rather to help guide our class as we each go through our individual process of learning more..."

Recognize Trust



With a statement like this, your student is demonstrating that they trust you enough to not let this go unsaid. Trust is a key ingredient for building quality relationships with your students. Research shows that behavior problems (as reported by students and teachers) are lower when students of color report that their teachers are trustworthy authority figures.³

"I know that might have been hard to share, so thank you for trusting me with that..."

"Thank you. I appreciate you trusting me enough to say that..."

Talking Points

What Does the Research Say?

Conversation Starters

Your Own Journey



This student's comment is a useful reminder: No one's ethnic-racial identity journey is the same. Research shows that educators who have explored more about their ethnic-racial identity, including White educators, are better positioned to support their students in this process.⁴ This conversation can be used as an opportunity to reiterate that everyone is on their own journey and every journey is unique.

"When it comes to learning about your identity, you're going to be the expert. My role is to support you..."

"I'm creating time for us to explore what our own ethnic-racial backgrounds mean to each of us on our own and then share this with each other..."

Critical Consciousness

We don't want to take away from the fact that being confronted with this information will be hard. Despite the challenges you may feel, keep in mind that students who are raising these valid concerns are demonstrating a level of *critical consciousness* (i.e., becoming aware of and challenging injustices) that can be beneficial for their academic success. In fact, research shows that developing *critical consciousness* positively predicts later standardized test scores and grades for students of color.⁵

Key Takeaway:

While it can be difficult to hear your students question your role as a White educator leading the Identity Project, their question is a sign of trust in you as their teacher and a sign that they are becoming aware of systemic injustice. It is important to validate your students, express your commitment to supporting them on their ethnic-racial identity journeys, and continuing on your own so that you may continue to model this difficult but necessary work to understand our ethnic-racial backgrounds.

References and Articles for Further Reading:

1. Llamas, J. D., Nguyen, K., & Tran, A. G. T. T. (2019). The case for greater faculty diversity: Examining the educational impacts of student-faculty racial/ethnic match. *Race Ethnicity and Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1679759>
2. Quintana, S. M., & Mahgoub, L. (2016). Ethnic and racial disparities in education: Psychology's role in understanding and reducing disparities. *Theory into Practice*, 55(2), 94-103.
3. Gregory, A., & Ripski, M. B. (2008). Adolescent trust in teachers: Implications for behavior in the high school classroom. *School Psychology Review*, 37(3), 337-353.
4. Peifer, J. S., Lawrence, E. C., Williams, J. L., & Leyton-Armakan, J. (2016). The culture of mentoring: Ethnocultural empathy and ethnic identity in mentoring for minority girls. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 22(3), 440-446.
5. Seider, S., Clark, S., & Graves, D. (2019). The development of critical consciousness and its relation to academic achievement in adolescents of color. *Child Development*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13262>
6. Tansey, M. (April 30, 2015). Teaching While White. Retrieved from <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/teaching-while-white>
7. McGeehan, C. (August 16, 2018). How Can We Build Anti-Racist White Educators? One teacher reflects on what he and other white educators need to understand as they work to build anti-racist practices and identities. Retrieved from <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/how-can-we-build-antiracist-white-educators>
8. Teaching While White. Blog and Podcast. <https://teachingwhilewhite.org/>

Please note that this is proprietary material and cannot be modified or sold without express written permission of Dr. Adriana Umaña-Taylor. For more information, please visit: <https://umana-taylorlab.gse.harvard.edu/>.

How to cite: Umaña-Taylor, A. J. & AERID lab (2020). *You May Be Wondering... What should I do if I'm a White educator and a student of color says that I shouldn't be teaching the Identity Project because I'm White and I can't understand their ethnic-racial identity or experiences?*. [Fact Sheet]. <https://umana-taylorlab.gse.harvard.edu/>