

Teachers 'Cannot Stop at Conversations' About Racism

By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) on June 8, 2020 10:59 PM

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(This is final post in a an eight-part series on this topic. You can see [Part One here](#), [Part Two here](#), [Part Three here](#), [Part Four here](#), [Part Five here](#), [Part Six here](#), and [Part Seven 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.

In **Part Two**, Dr. Tracey A. Benson and Holly Spinelli contributed their commentaries.

In **Part Three**, Joe Truss and Janice Wyatt-Ross made their recommendations.

In **Part Four**, Jeffrey Garrett, Keisha Rembert, and Erika Niles wrote their responses.

In **Part Five**, Denise Fawcett Facey and Adeyemi Stemberge, Ph.D., offered their voices to the conversation.

In **Part Six**, Terri N. Watson, Oman Frame, and Martha Caldwell answered the question.

In **Part Seven**, Shannon R. Waite, Ed.D., Dr. Sheila Wilson, and Kimberly Nurse shared their reactions.

Today, [Dennis Griffin Jr.](#), [Sarah Said](#), and [Jocelyn A. Chadwick, Ph.D.](#), finish up this series with their contributions. [Third Blog Down](#)

The Proverbial Safe Space

Dennis Griffin Jr. serves as the principal of Brown Deer Elementary School in Wisconsin. He has seven years of experience as a middle school educator and is entering his sixth year as an administrator. He is currently pursuing his doctoral studies in educational leadership at Cardinal Stritch University. Dennis believes all students will be successful in school when they develop relationships with educators that value their gift, cultures, and individuality:

The outrage and the outcry for justice in the most recent deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd has seen the nation call for everyone to speak out against injustice, especially educators. Far too often, we create the rhetoric around wanting to create the proverbial "SAFE SPACE." The "SAFE SPACE" to me is often viewed as a place where adversity and conflict exist only when we are sure that we protect the feelings of those who choose to engage in dialogue regarding the injustices that are a burden to our very souls.

If this is the case, I have news for you, a "SAFE SPACE" of this nature will never exist, and the transgressions of our world will continue to manifest, divide, and marginalize our world. The "SAFE SPACE" must not ignore and turn a blind eye to the current and past pain of others. Here is the reality, a "SAFE SPACE" can only be created when we are transparent about the current reality and engage in dialogue that confronts the dissonance, racism, and other injustices of our world that divide us in order to propel us into an era of self-reflection and change. The question that I have begun to ask others is, "Do you understand the level of privilege that comes from being able to wait for a SAFE SPACE?" While you are waiting for a SAFE SPACE, who is going to advocate for me? Who is going to advocate for our students? How will our world become better?"

If your students were in front of you right now, what would you do about the civil unrest that is happening? How do we go beyond the bus boycotts to let students know that our history is plagued with injustices against others, especially when it comes to the color of their skin? Would you ignore the situation and pretend that our students are unaware of what is happening? Would you take the political side and provide two sides to the story? The attempt to hide behind allowing our real selves to be on display for our students is equally telling in regards to our position on the issues. This is often done out of an idea that we may suffer pushback or repercussions for sharing our viewpoints.

The last option is would you openly express that this is a social-justice issue and that the actions that led to the death of George Floyd are morally and ethically wrong? One of the reasons that our students enter the world with blinders on is because we do not educate them outside the confines of the myth of good. One of my fears is that this could potentially have been myself, my father, my mother, my brother, my daughters, a friend, or even one of my students. This could have been one of your students!!!

Honestly, the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd serve as a tipping point in our nation. Take a time to think about this: Our tipping point was created due to the loss of countless lives, and in George Floyd's case, it was visible because it was captured on video and shared via social-media outlets. Knowing that institutional systems marginalize our world was not enough. I would like to think about this within the confines of our schools.

How disproportionate are your discipline and suspension rates? How disproportionate is the number of African American students who are in special education and gifted and talented programming. I could go on. The reality is, for years I have always taught two curricula. I have taught

the curriculum that was embedded in our textbooks to provide context for the social circles my students would engage in. Then, I would also teach the curriculum of how the color of their skin and gender could determine the quality and the safety of their life. I had to teach them that life was not fair. Are you willing to share this truth with your students and use history to provide you with evidence that will engage your students in critical thinking and become agents of change?

Educators, we can no longer wait for the proverbial "SAFE SPACE." Our desire to wait for the "SAFE SPACE" has enhanced the status quo's ability to create ripple effects that have taken human life. We tell our students to stand up for what is right. We tell our students to be the difference. Now is our time to be more than the ideology of words and be the models of change our students deserve to see.



"Things cannot stop at conversations"

Sarah Said currently leads a multilingual-learning program in an EL education school in a suburb 30 miles west of Chicago:

We're struggling. The images that America has seen of the way that George Floyd died will haunt us and our students forever. His name is one we will never forget. America's heart is broken, and its mind confused, processing anger, and trying to understand why history repeats itself. We will either be on a computer screen or face to face with our students in the fall. Some of us have already had discussions, via Zoom or some other platform, about how to come to terms with understanding what is happening around us in our communities. Our students have been through a lot in 2020, and now we have to all pick up the pieces together to continue stronger after this roller coaster of a year ... and it's only half over.

The conversations are important. We have to have them. But things cannot stop at conversations about history or feelings until the next incident happens again. We have to work with our students to understand the world politically so that they strive to make the world a better place. This is where we have to think about how we structure our schools and communities. When we structure our schools in ways that are equitable and support growing anti-racist communities, students can learn how to learn to do good in the world. They can unlearn ideologies that are hurting our communities.

But it starts with us ... educators, school leaders, and stakeholders. ... What are we doing to be change makers and model the importance of amplifying our voices for those who need us to do so? If we are not amplifying our own voice in our classrooms to advocate for our students and school communities, how would our students learn that? It starts with us. ...

It Starts With Self-Reflection ...

We have to understand ourselves. How do we show up to work every day? How do we see our own identity? How do we understand our students? When we have implicit biases, what do we do to self-correct?

Our inner courage is critical in creating change for people around us. When a colleague is talking about race in an offending manner, do we stay silent? When our school structures hurt the success of students from diverse communities, do we advocate for them? If we stay silent out of fear, we're part of the problem in our schools. We need to learn how to articulate what support (academically and socially) our students need and not allow our colleagues or leaders to stand in the way of that.

We Have to Allow Space for Others to Reflect

When we think about professional learning, we think about teaching strategies and standards. School leaders, professional learning needs to allow time and space for all staff to self-reflect and "unlearn" and come to terms with understanding microaggressions and biases they may have. When we learn about ourselves, we become more intentional about how we talk to our students and how we educate them.

We are all dealing internally with the images we have seen in the news and in our communities. We are mourning for George Floyd and we are angry about the way he died. As adults, we are processing the feelings we have to make sense of the future. Can we move on? No, we can't. We have to strive for change in our schools and learn to be better. Conversations have to happen with our teams and our students. Issues of race have to be talked about in schools, or we will continue to act as if nothing is wrong with our structures. But we have to move forward and push for policies and structures that will create conditions of success for all students from diverse backgrounds.



"Keep your eyes on the prize"

Jocelyn A. Chadwick, Ph.D., is a former professor currently guest lecturing and teaching seminars at Harvard Graduate School of Education. She is the author of *The Jim Dilemma: Reading Race in Huckleberry Finn*, *Common Core: Paradigmatic Shifts*, and *Using Literature in the Context of Literacy Instruction*. Chadwick currently serves as the vice president of the National Council of Teachers of English and is an expert consultant for and contributor to NBC News Education:

"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Never again, can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outsider agitator" idea. Anyone who lives in the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds."

"Letter from Birmingham Jail," August 1963

On June 8th, Mr. George Floyd will return to his home state and city; my own home state and city, Houston, Texas. Houston is the most diverse city in the United States. His family and his little girl will gather to say goodbye and lay him to rest. To rest ...

On May 25th, Mr. George Floyd was alive, contending with the pandemic, loss of a job, and an uncertain economy for so many Americans. Our students, their parents, teachers, and every American at this moment are mired, frightened, confused, daunted, frustrated. But . . . if you are reading this piece, most of you are teachers. We have always had an instructional mission that is also our passion.

Teachers who remember the civil rights movement, and those who teach about it in English/language arts and social studies classes, are keenly familiar with the watchword phrase, "Keep your eyes on the prize." Folk Singer Pete Seeger wrote and performed this song in 1963, and later, Mavis Staples brilliantly performed a gospel version. What inspired this song during the civil rights movement and kept it in our musical lexicon lies squarely with the *worldwide* response to the killing of Mr. George Floyd.

How do we proceed to guide our GenZ students through *this* monumental moment that has necessarily conjoined 400 years of slavery, the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, a failed Reconstruction, Jim Crow, civil rights, assassinations, the Black-power movement, and the *semblance* of equality and equity for ALL of our students in *our* country?

GenZ seeks objective exploration and inquiry so *they can process and think through*. "Listen" to some students who represent the majority of students in English classes with whom I have the privilege to share and learn:

"We don't mind reading hard texts, we mind not being protected by our teachers from the comments of other students."

"Have you ever been with a racist? Are you scared?"

"So, is Texas racist? Massachusetts?"

"Do you think [students' city] is racist?"

"I just don't get when to use or not to use [racially sensitive terms]; what's the rule and why?"

"Do you use racial slurs?"

In response to their queries, I have been listening *and* learning to move forward.

- Identify and recognize my own personal predilections and biases. My *personal* should never contextualize our students's literacy-learning rights to discover and evolve into their own persons with voice, choice, perspective.
- That said, respond honestly, accurately, candidly when students inquire.
- Keep in front of me the greatest tool the core-content areas have: arming students with lifelong literacy.
- Use content we teach to encourage students to question, to examine, push back, to stretch it into their here and now.
- Trust students to engage; listen to them and respond to their blending what is happening to them right now with what they are reading.
- Accept this generation's embrace of difference and pushback.
- Be prepared to respond to the hard student questions and allow them to use current events to think through and process.

GenZ needs the requisite history to understand better their here and now: Theirs is a world of social media; immediate contact; and images; along with, lest we forget, a pandemic and economic instability. Theirs is a world where *they* are now *witnesses* to a nation in turmoil, following the killing of George Floyd by four police officers. Many of its citizens, everyday people, are exercising our constitutional right to protest this injustice. Students see clearly that racism against one is racism is against all.

Let's remember and embrace, in spite of our own fear and perhaps, uncertainty, that we have 14 (PreK-12) years to make classrooms powerful, culminating in young adults who can:

- Speak up
- Inquire
- Engage
- Ask why/why not/what if?
- Make a difference

Let's use these present moments in time to intersect with our country's bad and good history to empower and strengthen our students. It is well worth remembering that in August 1963 when the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. penned "Letter from Birmingham Jail." His words then and now continue to guide us:

" . . . when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, and kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters . . . when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next..., then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair."

So, what is this tragedy teaching us, and how do we move forward with students? We continue to arm them with imperviable literacy skills, embrace open, earnest conversations that texts and events foment, guide, and keep them safe.



Thanks to Dennis, Sarah, and Jocelyn 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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