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A Pathway to Racial Literacy: Using the LETS ACT Framework to Teach Controversial Issues

LaGarrett J. King, Amanda E. Vickery, and Genevieve Caffrey

“[T]he problem of the Twentieth Century,” W.E.B. Du Bois wrote within the first few pages of his seminal 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, “is the problem of the color-line.”¹ Du Bois’s prediction proved correct, as race played a central role in shaping American politics, housing patterns, criminal-justice decisions, and education policy throughout the twentieth century. We do not know if Du Bois thought the “problem of the color-line” would extend into the twenty-first century, but race remains a polarizing issue—and one that often leads to silence and avoidance in classrooms and communities. For example, 73 percent of millennials who took part in a national 2014 poll believe that open dialogue is needed on racial matters, but only 20 percent of respondents said they feel comfortable talking about discrimination, race, and bias.²

The topic of race can elicit a myriad of emotions, including anger, fear, and guilt. Neuroscientists have even noted that our brains shut down during stressful racial encounters.³ It is no wonder, then, that race is controversial and that teachers are uncomfortable speaking about the topic with their students. Researchers have noted that even when race and racism are necessary to explain social studies content, the official curriculum tends either to ignore these concepts or to dilute their complexity or significance.⁴ While race and racism are permanent fixtures in our society, the field of social studies has a contentious relationship with these topics in terms of (1) the curriculum, (2) the profession, and (3) the policies (such as standards and position statements issued by the national organizations).⁵ As a dis-

cipline, we have yet to come to terms with the continued existence of white supremacy in our society or the ways in which the social studies curriculum privileges white cultural and historical knowledge.

Instead, educational institutions often adopt a “color-blind” approach to race, with the result that students and educators avoid frank conversations about race—and about the ways in which race has played a role in school discipline, the curriculum, and American society. When operating within a “color-blind” framework, people try to convince themselves that they do not “see” the race of those they teach or interact with.⁶ This approach is problematic because it ignores an important aspect of a person’s identity; moreover, it frames “race talk”

as happening in the past and ignores the prevalence of racism in the present.⁷ “When teachers affirm that race is irrelevant either by audible words or by their silence about race,” notes André Branch, “they reveal their perhaps unwitting racist assumption that all people are alike.... Educators who refuse to see racial differences may believe erroneously that they are choosing equity.”⁸ Moreover, Branch adds that “To teach children that race is irrelevant is likely to endanger the very lives of African American students, and other students of color who must live with the reality of the difference that race makes in their lives every day.”⁹

Racial Literacy

Because race is treated as a controversial issue within K-12 social studies classrooms, teachers report avoiding the topic. Some consider it too sensitive or complex for their students; others don’t want to say the wrong thing; still others fear being labeled a “racist.”¹⁰ We argue that one of the reasons why social studies teachers feel this way is because we lack a common racial literacy. In many ways, we speak different racial languages, causing confusion and hindering understanding. The first step toward achieving racial

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Dominic Altieri, an 8th grade history teacher at Synergy School in San Francisco, facilitates a class discussion about 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick's decision not to stand during the national anthem.

literacy, therefore, involves defining race and racism. Racial literacy understands race as a socially constructed concept—not a biological reality—that was set up to govern or control people on the basis of their skin color. Although it is an invented concept, race is nevertheless real for those who are victim to the social construct's manifestations in actions and thoughts, and to the systems that have been created to oppress and privilege certain groups of people. Achieving racial literacy enables people to understand that the way race is defined can change and is highly malleable based on geographic and temporal considerations.

Racism, therefore, is more than simple acts of individual prejudice; it is a systematic belief in maintaining institutional power. As Beverly Tatum points out, racism is the combination of prejudice plus power.¹¹ This equation helps us understand how White people, as a racialized category, and White norms, as an ideology, control the access to social, cultural, and economic resources and decision-making, and can lead (and have led) to the institutionalization of racist policies and practices. The key to racial literacy rests with the awareness that racism is not simply the product of individual discrimination but the result of institutional and structural factors.

Racial literacy also involves taking that definition and (1) understanding the intersections of power and race, (2) being able to locate and analyze racial systems, (3) possessing the grammar and vocabularies associated with racial discourse, such as *White supremacy*, *anti-Blackness*, *racialization*, *racial identity*, and *intersectionality*, while (4) differentiating among terms such as *ethnicity*, *nationality*, *discrimination*, *prejudice*, and *stereotyping*.¹² A fifth element of racial literacy is the ability to “read, recast, and resolve” racially stressful situations.¹³ In other words, teachers and students need to learn how to see a racial moment, do something about it, and leave with a greater understanding of its complexity. For social studies teachers, racial literacy involves the ability to understand and recognize how race connects to our curriculum (even when it is not explicit); to implement the appropriate pedagogies for racial topics; and exhibit action in a civically responsible manner.¹⁴ Topics around race and racism are controversial because we lack a common racial literacy and the pedagogical tools needed to bridge our racial languages. To improve teachers' as well as students' racial literacies, we advocate implementation of the LETS ACT framework.

Controversial Issue Pedagogy: The LETS ACT Framework

Controversial issues are an important part of democratic education. Unfortunately, however, teachers often feel uncomfortable discussing these issues in their classrooms. First, educators report that they want to create respectful classroom environments and often feel that controversial issues could create discord and uncontrollably passionate responses among students. Second, while a number of teachers state that they would like to lead classroom conversations on controversial issues, many are unsure about how to conduct discussions that are lively while remaining respectful. When racial issues are ignored, however, either through the social studies curriculum or through the absence of discussion of current events related to race, tension develops between teachers and students, especially students of color.¹⁵ Faced with this dilemma, teachers often decide to avoid what they fear will become heated discussions, even though students appear to enjoy discussing controversial issues in their social studies classes.¹⁶

The LETS ACT Framework, developed by co-author Genevieve Caffrey, seeks to guide teachers in their efforts to foster racial literacy skills when exploring controversial issues in classrooms. These are the framework's seven steps:

(1) *Love & Listen*: Setting up a safe environment to explore racialized issues requires a commitment to love our students, which involves perceiving them as experts who can succeed; maintaining political clarity regarding the power dynamic in the teacher-student relationship; and listening to their multiple realities, stories, and perspectives. Storytelling is a powerful way to create a loving classroom culture. Early in the school year, students and teachers can share stories or autobiographies about their experiences with or identities around race, which allows the classroom community to more deeply understand the diverse ways in which its members perceive, act, and construct. Storytelling

also develops racial literacy because through stories, we see ourselves differently, assess our emotions, and find the capacity to resolve tensions that arise.¹⁷

A loving classroom culture surveys and listens to students' prior knowledge and questions about racialized events and issues. Before planning lessons around a racialized current event such as the Colin Kaepernick controversy, teachers could use individual questionnaires or KWL (Know, Want to Know, Learned) charts to grasp their students' distinctive knowledge and questions around the topic. Prompts could

include: "Why does Colin Kaepernick kneel during the national anthem? Why are some people angry at Kaepernick and others proud of him? What questions do you have?" Listening carefully to students' responses—and to the emotions behind them—will more effectively prepare teachers to enlighten and educate class members.

(2) *Enlighten & Educate*: Before delving deeply into race or racialized issues, teachers can review enlightening discussion norms and mindfulness techniques to reduce stress when tensions arise and to keep discourse

respectful. For example, teachers can tell students, "We are going to explore some issues that involve race and racial tension, which is known to cause stress. If you feel stress, here are some norms to follow and mindfulness techniques to try so that you can read your stress level and cope with it. Such techniques may include: (a) calculating the level of stress you feel; (b) locating that stress physiologically; (c) communicating the stress you are experiencing either to yourself or to a trusted individual; and (d) facilitating relaxation by breathing deeply and exhaling in that moment."¹⁸

Teaching Suggestions: #TakeAKnee and the History of Black Activism in Sports

When covering current events such as the #TakeAKnee protest, it is important for teachers to place the event within the history of the Black freedom movement and the activism of Black athletes. The #TakeAKnee protest is part of the long tradition of Black citizens expressing critical patriotism. Salamishah Tillet argued that dissidence and dissent, which she calls "critical patriotism," have been essential components of U.S. history and important ways that Black Americans have participated as citizens.¹ The core principle of "Black critical patriotism" is personhood: the recognition of Black Americans as human beings.² This is achieved through the use of protest, speeches, and taking part in the political process to bring attention to the state sanctioned violence committed against African Americans. In mainstream media coverage, African Americans who engage in political protest and who express anger towards injustices are often labeled "angry mobs" rather than being portrayed as citizens engaging in first amendment rights to free speech and political protest. Teachers should unpack such racial stereotypes and explore why many white Americans criticize Colin Kaepernick (and other Black athletes) when they protest injustices affecting Black Americans.

Participating in political protest is a protected right and responsibility, and teachers should include discussions probing the topic in the classrooms. However, the class community should first revisit discussion norms to ensure that students feel safe to participate honestly and that they are open to learning from one another. Teachers can first begin by having students share personal definitions of patriotism. These responses can lead into the following questions: Can a person be patriotic while protesting injustice? Is it ok to be angry at injustice? Does anger or protest make a person less of a patriot? Finally, as a whole class, define and discuss "critical patriotism."

Teachers can introduce the history of Black activism in sports by analyzing primary sources featuring boxing champion

Muhammad Ali and his protest of the Vietnam War as well as Olympic runners John Carlos and Tommie Smith raising their fists in the Black power salute during the 1968 Olympic awards ceremony in Mexico City. These two incidents are examples of Black athletes engaged in critical patriotism who are then punished for protesting injustice. Muhammad Ali was stripped of his heavyweight boxing title, and Carlos and Smith were both stripped of their Olympic medals. Students can discuss the athletes' decisions and reasons for engaging in protests: What led the athletes to act? Do the athletes have a moral obligation and right to engage in such protests?

Introducing recent protests by Black athletes connects the past to the present. Divide students into small groups to jigsaw distinct current events articles about NBA and NFL players protesting police violence and injustice in Black communities. Students should consider and discuss why and how the athletes are protesting. What was the opposition to the protests? Did the athletes face consequences for protesting? Why or why not?

After each group reports out, the class can pull common themes from the different articles and reflect on why Black athletes are met with criticism and/or punishment when they use their platform and voice to speak out against an issue.

To end the discussion, students can revisit questions from the beginning of the lesson and reflect on whether their answers have changed: *What does it mean to be patriotic? What is "critical patriotism"? Do you have a moral obligation to use any platform at your disposal to combat injustice? Why or why not?*

Notes

1. Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*. (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012).
2. Christopher L. Bussey and Irene Walker, "A Dream and a Bus: Black Critical Patriotism in Elementary Social Studies Standards," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 45 (2017): 456–488.

While considering students' prior knowledge and experiences, teachers can then educate them about the issue being discussed through multiple perspectives using resources such as videos, newspaper articles, films, podcasts, and photographs. Educating students on vocabulary words is a crucial activity for this phase so that students understand the content. For example, before critically analyzing the Kaepernick controversy, important vocabulary words to teach include *racial injustice*, *patriotism*, *police brutality*, *First Amendment rights*, and *protest*.

(3) *Talk*: After educating students about the issue through multiple perspectives, teachers can facilitate an interactive activity that allows students to talk about the issue in small groups in a way that does not force them to take a position on the issue—yet. Teachers can look up perspectives on the Kaepernick controversy and print each perspective on a different piece of paper. Students work together to categorize the perspectives along a spectrum (pro-Kaepernick vs. anti-Kaepernick perspectives; legal vs. moral vs. emotional perspectives, etc.). Students can also evaluate the evidence used within each perspective and sort each position along the spectrum according to the strength or validity of evidence. This discussion-oriented activity and others such as Socratic Seminars are not intended to spark debate on the issue, but rather to give students a better sense of the issue itself and the range of perspectives on the topic.¹⁹

(4) *Scribe*: After talking about a controversial issue such as the Kaepernick controversy, students and teachers benefit from being given time to write and critically reflect on the issue and/or the conversation. John Dewey reminds us that experience by itself does not necessarily result in learning; experience becomes educative when critical, reflective thought creates new meaning and leads to growth and to the ability to take informed actions.²⁰ Prompts could include: “What new information or thinking did you experience from the activity? How did you feel when talking about

this issue with your peers? If there was tension, did you use any mindfulness techniques?” Teachers should also stop to reflect, because the development of a safe, loving classroom community is contingent upon critical reflection.

(5) *Analyze Systems*: This phase asks students to analyze how race operates in systems that privilege some and marginalize others.²¹ Teachers can frame the current event (Kaepernick) as the “tip of the iceberg” and the deeper issue (racial injustice) as the rest of the deep, colossal iceberg. Teachers could read aloud children's literature that connects current events with the deeper issue, such as *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story of Racial Injustice*.²² Students could study society's reaction to other athletes who have protested racial injustice and reflect on, “What has changed and what hasn't changed?” These activities allow students to analyze routine forms of systematic racism, which is a crucial skill in becoming racially literate.

(6) *Conclude through Deliberation*: After studying the issues in depth, students should be given the opportunity to draw conclusions around what they believe should be done about the problem through deliberation—a discussion that aims at deciding on a plan of action that will address a problem.²³ To deliberate, the teacher should present a specific question that addresses the issue. For example, “Should Kaepernick and other players who kneel during the national anthem be penalized for kneeling?” The teacher should allow time for students to prepare statements for or against the proposal, with persuading arguments and supporting evidence. Teachers can then facilitate a deliberation structure, such as a fishbowl, in which a small group deliberates in the middle of a circle (as if they are fish in a fishbowl) while the rest of the class members silently watch, listen, take notes, research claims, and prepare statements for when it is their turn to deliberate inside the fishbowl. After deliberating, students can vote on what should or should not be done. Teachers

should remind students that regardless of who wins the vote, each student will have the opportunity in the next phase of the framework to take action in a way that supports their own opinion, even if it was a minority opinion. Although majority has strength in numbers, in democracies the minority can always work hard to take action and change minds.

Concluding through deliberation obligates students to develop their racial literacies by moving beyond what scholars Melissa Mosley Wetzell and Rebecca Rogers describe as “white talk,”²⁴ which involves practices such as avoidance or lingering in the ambiguity of race, to make real decisions about the ways in which they think diverse individuals should live together. Deliberation can be contentious and uncomfortable, but it is an essential mechanism for supporting students' ability to take a stand on an issue, weigh evidence from multiple sources, and develop critical democratic citizenship for the common good.

(7) *Take Action*: Informed action is a vital part of preparing students for democratic citizenship and implementing the National Council for the Social Studies' C3 Framework Inquiry Arc. Teachers should give students the opportunity to brainstorm action ideas and outline action plans that support their conclusions around the issue. Given the breadth of ideological diversity typically found in classrooms, there will likely be multiple action plans reflecting dissenting views. Depending on the number and range of opinions, students may take action individually, in small groups, or as a whole class. A group of students may decide to take a knee together during their own sports game to support Kaepernick. Other students may decide to write a letter to the editor arguing for fines against Kaepernick and athletes who kneel during the anthem. One individual student may paint a mural reflecting racial injustice or patriotism. Giving students the time and space to interact with the public more wholly equips them to be active citizens who can effectively address public



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problems. Taking informed action moves students beyond a discussion of the ways things are or should be and propels them forward as real stakeholders with power to influence political decisions in the public sphere.

Conclusion

The United States, which had enslavement rather than freedom as its official policy for a significant period of its history, is now only two-and-a-half generations removed from the civil rights movement. The nation has still not healed from its racial past. Centering race within our social studies classrooms is essential to this healing process. In his *Talk to Teachers*, James Baldwin observed that children “have the right and necessity to examine everything.”²⁵ This includes the need to examine U.S. history through a racial lens and to learn about racial inequities in the present day. These are important conversations to have, and the social studies classroom can serve as a critical space for students and teachers to unlearn racist assumptions that have perplexed us as a nation. It is comforting that many young people believe that racial matters need more dialogue; but with only 20 percent (as noted previously) feeling confident enough to discuss racial issues, we have failed as a social studies field. We hope all teachers come to realize that it is possible to discuss race and other controversial issues in a civil and productive manner that empowers every student to feel valued and affirmed. Giving students opportunities to explore these issues develops their racial literacies and equips them to be proactive citizens in a democratic society. 🌍

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