

How to Address Race and Police Violence: Advice for Educators, Part II

By Kate Stoltzfus on September 26, 2016 1:00 AM



Last week, BookMarks invited several professors, activists, and authors who have written books or resources for teaching about race in the classroom to offer some guidance to K-12 educators after another string of fatal police shootings in Charlotte, N.C.; Tulsa, Okla.; and Columbus, Ohio.

As educators unpack the news with their students, many are likely wondering how they can effectively lead conversations about continued unrest over police violence, bias, and race. What should educators keep in mind when engaging students in topics of race and police violence? Their email responses below encourage educators to listen, to embrace discomfort, and to offer students an open space to grapple with the complex climate at hand.

(Read the first part of our [interviews with a middle grade author and a professor of history for more advice](#) about how to have these discussions.)

Cornelius Minor, lead staff developer at the [Teachers College Reading and Writing Project](#)

"Please help your students to know that state-sanctioned violence against black people did not start with Mike Brown. For many, though, this most recent iteration of sustained resistance to that violence did. As such, when Mike was murdered in August 2014, it was time to talk. It has been more than two years since then, and police have killed at least 2,195 people. A disproportionately high percentage of those killed were black. This is an epidemic. Time for just talking is over.

Rally your students to do something. With all that we know and all that we have seen to do nothing now is to be okay with all of this. Public education in a democracy is the greatest safeguard we have against tyranny. Thomas Jefferson theorized that an educated populace would always be equipped to protect freedom. Our silence around these issues compromises that freedom. For all of us. In this context, silence is undemocratic. Conversations that lead to community service, activism, writing, reflection, critical thinking, and coalitionbuilding are ultimately democratic."

Monique Morris, co-founder and president of the [National Black Women's Justice Institute](#) and author, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (New Press, 2016)

"I want to encourage educators to recognize that the public display (and viral circulation) of police shootings is a shared trauma. When talking to young people about what is happening around them, it is important to encourage young people to process notions of fairness and shared humanity—and to engage them in healing modalities, particularly breathing exercises and arts. These processes help young people articulate grief and release the toxic stress that is presented by these adverse cultural experiences."

Deborah Menkart, executive director, [Teaching for Change](#)

"It is important to show not just empathy, but also solidarity with the young people in our classrooms. While some students will wonder how this could happen in the United States, for many others, unfortunately, police brutality and intimidation are all too familiar. In an article for the organization Rethinking Schools, teaching artist Renée Watson explains how she [uses poetry to help students deal with the very real fear for their own safety](#) and play a role in exposing the violence. An exploration of U.S. history can help students understand how racism, while not natural, has been central to this country's history and is embedded in all of our institutions, including the criminal justice system. A good place to begin is with students' questions. We have [readings and lessons on 20th-century protests against police brutality](#), the militarization of police, and housing inequality."

Allyson Criner Brown, associate director, [Teaching for Change](#)

"As educators wrestle with these incidents and the larger issues of police violence, racism, and bias, I hope they will be proactive in creating a safe space in the classroom to explore these issues alongside students. Do not position your students to educate you about the history or present realities of racism, classism, and other forms of oppression. Do some homework and then be ready to listen to and walk with your students through these injustices. You cannot and do not have to have all the answers—share your feelings with students as you affirm theirs. Ask your questions along with students' as you explore the root causes of these issues and steps toward a more just future. Invite your students' perspectives into the classroom and curriculum even as you wrestle with your own."

Maureen Costello, director of [Teaching Tolerance](#)

"Police violence, race, racism and bias are teachable topics. Yet, bringing these topics into the classroom requires awareness, preparation and reflection on the part of educators. Teaching Tolerance offers several resources—including the web package [Teaching About Race, Racism, and Police Violence](#) and the feature story 'Don't Say Nothing'—that help

educators prep, teach, and [spur much-needed discussion in the classroom.](#)"

Keisha N. Blain, visiting research scholar at University of Pennsylvania, assistant professor of history at University of Iowa, and co-developer of #CharlestonSyllabus

"I would encourage educators to [utilize resources like the Charleston Syllabus](#) or [Ferguson Syllabus](#) to broach these kinds of conversations. At the same time, I would caution educators to be sensitive especially considering that students of color, in particular, are also dealing with the trauma of witnessing these acts of police violence. Open dialogue about these issues are meaningless if those who facilitate these discussions lack empathy and genuine concern for those who are especially vulnerable to state-sanctioned violence."

The responses have been edited for length and clarity.

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