

# Discussion Prompts

1. When teachers say they are color blind, they are usually saying that they do not discriminate and that they treat all their students equally. Of course, being fair and treating each student with respect are essential to effective teaching. However, race and ethnicity are important parts of children's identities, and contribute to their culture, their behavior, and their beliefs. When race and ethnicity are ignored, teachers miss opportunities to help students connect with what is being taught. Recognizing that a student's race and ethnicity influences their learning allows teachers to be responsive to individual differences. In some cases, ignoring a student's race and ethnicity may undermine a teacher's ability to understand student behavior and undermines students' confidence in doing well in a school culture where expectations and communication are unfamiliar.

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2. It is certainly true that students who are confident in their ability to do well in school and achieve at higher levels than do students with the same ability who lack this sense of efficacy. However, if students come to believe that they are achieving at high levels when they are not, this situation can lead to a belief that they need not work harder. And, if they are aware that other students are doing better than they are, this may lead students to believe that less is expected of them. This, of course, is the case—less is being expected. High self-esteem does not, in itself, translate to high academic performance. High self-esteem derived from solid performance in school contributes to student engagement and effort to improve further.

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3. Students do need to experience success in order to stay motivated. It makes sense, therefore, to give students work that they can accomplish. The potential downside here is that this will lead to lower expectations by both students and teachers. The challenge for teachers, then, is to be clear about the ultimate academic goal and ensure that students engage in increasingly demanding work in order to meet that goal. When that work is accompanied by teacher support and the expectation of success, students achieve at high levels.

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4. Studies of the influences on student achievement invariably show that student family income is as a significant correlate of low achievement. However, when students' socioeconomic status is taken into account, race is often explains some of the differences in student performance. For example, black students typically score less well on tests than white students with similar family incomes. The reasons for this are complex and experts disagree about why this is so. Most experts dismiss explanations having to do with race-related "culture" or genetic differences among races. Some experts believe that the racial influence on achievement lies in the experiences racially and ethnically diverse students may have in school—such as low expectations, teaching that is insufficiently responsive to differences in student interests and needs, or differential access to learning opportunities. There is considerable agreement among researchers that "stereotype threat"—the belief that societal stereotypes about the limits of the academic abilities of African American, Latino and Native American students has merit can discourage such students from seeking to achieve at high levels.

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5. Teachers who are responsive to their students values, beliefs and experiences will be more effective than those who are not. While there are some generalizations that can be made about the cultures of different racial and ethnic groups that can help teachers to begin to understand their students, these generalizations can lead to stereotypes and a failure to recognize that within broad racial and ethnic groupings (e.g., Latino and Asian) there are very big differences related to subgroups (e.g., Chinese Americans and Cambodian) and social class. Moreover, even within subgroups and student of similar socioeconomic status, there are often significant differences in the factors that influence student learning. There is no substitute for getting to know each student well and adapting instruction, as best one can, to their individual needs.

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6. Many teachers have learned that they should take into account the learning styles of their students. But the concept of learning styles has different meanings and much recent research on learning does not talk about learning styles. Among the reasons why many cognitive psychologists discount the importance of learning styles is that the intuitively sensible idea is easily abused. For example, we all prefer to learn in some ways more than others. But this does not mean that our brains function differently when we learn. And, if our preferences are reinforced, we may fail to learn how to learn in other ways. Since we cannot control the demands on us to learn, especially outside of school, being taught in terms of our preferred “learning style” can limit our success in solving problems. Some ways of describing learning styles—such as distinctions between “concrete operationalizing” and “abstract conceptualization”—implicitly represent a hierarchy of learning capabilities. Thus, students not challenged to learn to conceptualize complex phenomena will be disadvantaged in taking on many tasks most highly valued by society and essential to complex problem solving.

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7. Some students learn lessons in their homes and communities about appropriate behavior that discourage them from participating actively in class discussions. Others prefer to work in small groups but not to speak out in class. Such dispositions are common among some Native American students and some students of Asian descent. Clearly, teachers need to be sensitive to students who are hesitant to speak in public but participate in class by listening and showing understanding through writing and individual conversations. On the other hand, when students do not learn to express themselves in public settings and to feel confident about their verbal abilities, this undermines the development of verbal skills and literacy more generally. This, in turn, limits their willingness and capacity to take on certain potentially rewarding roles and responsibilities. Of course, the reluctance of some students to engage in class may not be cultural at all so generalizations about cultural characteristics should be treated as possible explanations rather than diagnoses.

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8. Research is clear that most students *can* benefit from participating in learning groups comprised of students who have different levels of achievement and in which students of different races and ethnicities participate. But to say that this can be the case is not to say that it will. The success of heterogeneous groups depends a great deal on the extent to which teachers carefully structure group work and proactively prepare all students to participate taking into account the needs and dispositions of each student. Furthermore, there are times when students need direct instruction on particular skills and should be grouped with students who have similar needs.

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9. The “basic skills first” approach to learning is intuitively sensible and is reinforced by some curricula. However, when students are not given challenging problem solving tasks at early stages of their cognitive development, they will not develop important skills. This is particularly problematic for students who have limited opportunities for problem solving. So, when the curriculum turns to lessons that demand the ability to make judgments and inferences, basic skills first students will be disadvantaged. Additionally, when basic skills are taught in isolation from authentic contexts—such as a short story rather than a worksheet—students do not learn to apply what they have been taught or recognize what they have learned in a variety of contexts.

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10. It is certainly true that students who are struggling with English may and probably will have more trouble with tasks that require reading than students whose native language is English. However, when English language learners are asked to do less challenging work than other students, they can fall behind. In some cases, difficulties with English is seen as limited academic ability. Teachers need to guard against “dumbing down” the curriculum or having low expectations for English language learners. This means that they need to seek or provide extra help for students whose English is limited to ensure that they have the same learning opportunities as their English speaking peers. English language learners often need years to master academic language, which is more complex than the social language they acquire more quickly. It is important that they begin to learn academic language immediately, to prevent them from falling behind further.

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- 11.** In many schools throughout the country, high stake accountability programs have pressured teachers to narrow the curriculum and focus on the short-run task of having students do well on the next standardized test. If this means that teachers do not have time or motivation to try to understand how their students' dispositions and experiences related to race and ethnicity can influence their learning, the likely result will be lower student achievement, especially for students who may be struggling the most. Good teaching requires that teachers build on their students' prior knowledge. Moreover, students learn best when they feel recognized and acknowledged for the aspects of their identity they deem important. When students feel that their identities are ignored, they often disengage from learning and adopt a stance of outsider among strangers.

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- 12.** Talking about what appear to be racial issues with respect to student interactions, student-teacher interactions or interactions among members of the school staff is uncommon. Race is a "hot button" in our country (and most others) and it may feel that discussing potential misunderstandings or conflicts will make things worse. Moreover, many worry about being seen as insensitive or preoccupied with race. No doubt some issues that could be race-related are not. But, this cannot be known without bringing up the issue. While the country has made great progress in reducing racial prejudice and discrimination, negative stereotypes, concerns about fairness, and the absence of comfort in interracial relationships persist, especially when the stakes of common action or the resolution of interpersonal conflict are high. In schools where racial issues are openly dealt with, school leaders make clear that it is important to be candid and to trust one another while ensuring that action is taken when problems are surfaced.

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**13.** When families (not all students live with or are primarily cared for by one or more parents) do not get engaged in supporting their children’s learning, the job of the teacher is more difficult. The reasons why families don’t get involved are many. They may lack interest, but more often parents cannot get to the school, feel that they lack the knowledge of resources to help, or feel that they do not know what their role should be. This is especially true, of course, for families from some cultures or who do not feel comfortable with English and for single parents who may work more than one job and have responsibilities for caring for other children. Schools that support teachers in reaching out to families in several ways, and that see family engagement as a school-wide responsibility can significantly increase the extent to which families help their children do well in school.

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