



## Preparing to Discuss Michael Brown in the Classroom

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Recent events in Ferguson, Missouri involving the shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown have prompted a broad range of emotions across the United States. As some are reminded of the shootings of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis, and others harken back to the tragic death of Emmett Till in 1955, social protests in Ferguson, Missouri have attracted national and international attention. While the facts of the case are still being sorted out by those in the criminal justice system, these events are teachable moments in classrooms across the District of Columbia Public Schools.

In an effort to support teachers in DCPS who wish to integrate this teachable moment into their classrooms, this document provides:

- Ten suggestions for preparing and framing a conversation using democratic principles while also allowing students, especially those who have experienced racial profiling, to express their views in a respectful manner;
- Eight resources teachers can use to build their own background knowledge or to share with students to help frame classroom discussions; and
- A protocol for engaging students in a process for examining, understanding, and responding to complex issues related to diversity and equity in schools.

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When educators approach classroom discussion concerning incidents of racism, profiling or other similar topics, we must be keenly aware of the raw emotions that can surface among our students and people within the community. The suggestions below have been adapted from [TeachableMoment.org](http://TeachableMoment.org), a project of Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility.

**1. Create a safe, respectful, and supportive tone in your classroom.** Sometimes students don't participate in discussions about sensitive issues because they worry that they will be teased, their opinions will be ridiculed, or strong feelings will arise because the topic hits close to home. To create a safe and supportive environment, make group agreements at the beginning of the year. Remind students that when they talk about groups of people, they should try to avoid speaking in absolutes; using the word "some," not "all." Hold community-building activities to create a positive and respectful classroom environment, and resolve conflicts proactively. Most importantly, model how to talk about sensitive and controversial topics by being honest and open yourself, respecting different points of view and accepting students' feelings.

**2. Prepare yourself.** Before you delve into a difficult topic with your students, educate yourself with background knowledge. TeachableMoment.org has up-to-date lessons on many key issues that provide both background information and suggested activities. Next, articulate your own point of view on the topic for yourself so that when students ask for your opinion, you will be prepared. Though many teachers try to keep their own points of view out of the classroom, if it is appropriate to share yours, try to wait until the end of the discussion. Also, consider in advance the possible "triggers" for your students. For example, if you are discussing police brutality and the Michael Brown incident, remember that you will almost certainly have students who have been victims of racial profiling in your classroom. Some of these students may feel relieved to discuss a topic so relevant to their lives, while others may feel embarrassed. This doesn't mean

you should avoid potentially controversial topics, but you should be mindful not to highlight students who may wish to remain silent. Be aware that strong feelings could arise and plan in advance for how to handle them. Remind your students about the ground rules and explain that this issue may affect some students very personally. Depending on the topic, you may even want to speak in advance with those students, or their parents, who have a personal connection to it.

**3. Find out what students already know or have experienced about the topic.** Start with what the students already know. You can assess their prior knowledge in a variety of ways: create a semantic web as a whole class and brainstorm associations with the topic; have them talk with a partner; or have them write in response to a prompt. If the topic is very delicate, you might ask them to write anonymously first, then use that writing to decide how to proceed in a later class. Make a list of all the questions they have, either publicly or for your own planning. These questions are an additional window into what students already know, or think they know, and what they don't know. Ask students to articulate where they got their information and opinions, and invite them to talk about how they know their sources are reliable. Remind them that, when learning about or discussing sensitive information, they should always ask, "What do I know and how do I know it?" While students should be pushed to corroborate information from multiple sources and consider perspective, be sure not to undermine the value students' life experiences as well.

**4. Compile the students' questions and examine them together.** After giving students basic information about your topic, elicit questions they still have. If they are focusing on content questions (who, what, where, why, when), expand their inquiry so they think beyond the basic facts and dig into deeper or "essential" questions. For example, if you are going to discuss the killing of Michael Brown, content questions might be: Who was Michael Brown? Where did he grow up? Why was he in Ferguson? These questions are important, but questions such as "Why do you believe the police shot him?" and "How should communities react to this tragedy?" push students to make connections beyond one news story and lead to a more complex understanding of the situation. Another fruitful line of questioning might be asking how the issue affects their lives in Washington, DC and how it affects society at large.

**5. Make connections.** Help students make connections between the topic at hand and their own lives. How does the issue affect them or their family, friends or community? Why should they care? If there is no obvious connection, help them find one. Often, starting with multimedia, whether photos, video or infographics, can hook students. You might also help them make connections by thinking about what else they know about, in current news or in history, that shares some of the same details.

**6. Have students investigate and learn more.** It is critical that students have a chance to find answers to their questions, conduct research, talk to people, and learn more in a way that makes the topic meaningful for them. First, however, make sure your students understand how to tell the difference between opinions and facts. You might make a T-chart and use examples from a news article on a topic you are studying to demonstrate, then invite students to find and share their own examples from additional articles.

For example, if you were engaging your class on the topic of Michael Brown or Trayvon Martin, students could read and compare information and opinion from sources such as the mainstream media and Twitter/Facebook. They might start with a news article for factual background information, then read an editorial to see how an opinion piece about the same topic is written. Students might then study a timeline about the events leading up to the incident or watch a video. Finally, they might learn about public perception of this incident by analyzing a Gallup poll which shows opinions on the topic broken down by race, geography, or other demographic groups. They might look for related news and opinions to prompt rich discussions and open up opportunities to hear other students' voices. Remember to point students to sources with contrasting political slants as well. For example, they might contrast reporting on the same

topic in [The Progressive](#) versus [The Weekly Standard](#), or the [Center for American Progress](#) versus the [Heritage Foundation](#). Encourage students to seek out a range of people to learn more, including people who have strong opinions or special expertise on the topic. While students are gathering this information, emphasize that even "factual" information has a point of view. While they are researching, they should ask themselves: What is the point of view of this source? How reliable is it, and why? Below are links to suggested articles and resources which can be used to support student inquiry into Michael Brown:

- ["Op-Ed by a 23 year-old"](#)
- ["Young, Black and Male in America"](#)
- ["Have You Ever Interacted with the Police?"](#)
- ["When The Media Treats White Suspects And Killers Better Than Black Victims "](#)
- ["How We'd Cover Ferguson if it Happened in Another Country"](#)
- Melissa Harris Perry – ["Tribute to Black Men Killed by Police"](#)
- ["12 Things White People Can Do Now Because Ferguson"](#)
- ["Teaching Ferguson: Current events in the Social Studies Classroom"](#)

**7. Explore students' opinions and promote dialogue.** After they have researched a topic thoroughly, students are ready to form and express their own points of view. It is important to encourage them to be open to different points of view. You might do an "opinion continuum" exercise where they show whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree or are somewhere in between or not sure on a variety of topics. Help promote dialogue, as opposed to debate. Dialogue aims for understanding, an enlargement of view, complicating one's thinking and an openness to change. Provide opportunities for various kinds of group discussion where different perspectives get shared. These opportunities can be found in lessons available on [TeachableMoment.org](#) and include think-pair-share, conversation circles, group go-rounds, panels, micro-labs, and fishbowls.

**8. Be responsive to feelings and values.** Even though you have set up ground rules at the outset and developed a respectful classroom environment, once a hot topic emerges you need to continue to monitor classroom tone. Remind students about the ground rules, especially if they are violated. Take the emotional "temperature" of the classroom periodically to find out how students are feeling, and encourage the discussion of feelings throughout. Build in different ways for students to participate, but also to opt out if a discussion is emotionally difficult. Give opportunities for students to write their thoughts, perhaps anonymously, instead of sharing verbally. Remind students that while you want them to participate, they always have the right to "pass" if they feel uncomfortable. Again, if you anticipate that a certain topic may elicit too many strong feelings for a particular student, talk with them in advance.

**9. Make home connections.** Use parents and other family members as primary sources by having students interview them as part of their research. Communicate with parents about your approach to discussing controversial issues. You can do this by sending a letter home in the beginning of the year and encouraging parents to let you know if there are any sensitive issues for their family so you will be prepared.

**10. Do Something.** If students are engaged in an issue discussed in class and feel strongly about it, they may want to do something about it. Your study should be an opportunity for taking informed action. This could involve learning more and doing more focused research. It could also involve helping students carry out a social action or community service project related to the issue. Students can learn more about how other young people did projects around recent issues in the news, such as starting a petition, organizing large student demonstrations, and speaking out on the topic. If the issue is a political one, they can engage in

writing letters, speaking at public hearings, raising money, participating in demonstrations or writing articles for a school or local newspaper.

# Collaborative Problem-Solving for Equity & Justice: A 6-Step Model

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<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural>

The purpose of this model is to facilitate an organized process for examining, understanding, and responding to complex issues related to diversity and equity in schools.

## 1. **Problem Identification**

Identify or name the situation and relevant related issues. What is the conflict? What is the source of the conflict?

## 2. **Perspectives**

Create a list of every person, group, and institution impacted by the incident. How is each of these people and institutions affected by the situation? Be sure to include possible victims, victimizers, members of the community, and anyone else who is touched by the incident directly or indirectly. It may be necessary to make some assumptions for this step, intensifying the importance of incorporating as many voices and perspectives as possible into the process of compiling the information.

## 3. **Challenges and Opportunities**

With the varied perspectives in mind, what are the individual and institutional challenges and constraints within which the situation must be addressed? What are the challenges based on the individuals directly involved, and what institutional constraints must inform an approach for addressing the situation? What are the educational and growth opportunities presented by the incident, both for the people directly involved and the institution?

## 4. **Strategies**

Brainstorm approaches for addressing the situation, attempting to maximize the extent to which the negative outcomes of the situation are addressed while simultaneously maximizing the extent to which you take advantage of educational and growth opportunities. Keep in mind the varied perspectives and the fact that any solution will affect everyone differently. This is not the step at which to challenge and critique each other's ideas. Record every idea, no matter how unreasonable it may sound to individuals in the group.

## 5. **Solutions**

Focus your strategies into a formal plan of action. Keep in mind the varied perspectives as well as the challenges and opportunities. Be sure to come up with at least two or three specific responses, whether they focus on the individual conflict or the underlying issues at an institutional level.

## 6. **Expected Outcomes**

Name the outcomes you foresee as a result of the solutions you identified. Revisit the perspectives step to ensure a standard of equity and fairness.