



DALLAS ISD NSI

Student + Teacher COLLABORATIVE ON RACE & RACISM



This publication highlights the voices of Dallas Independent School District (ISD) middle and high school students and teachers who participated in the **Dallas ISD Student + Teacher Design Collaborative on Race and Racism**. Over a three-month period, teachers and students met to listen deeply to each others' experiences with race and racism and develop classroom lessons about racial identity.

The Collaborative was created as part of the Network for School Improvement, a partnership between **Dallas ISD** and the **Institute for Learning (IFL)**. To further center the stories and experiences of students of color in the network, a multiracial team of process facilitators and anti-racist consultants from **Be Gr8rr** and **Community Design Partners** designed the three-month Collaborative.

Seven middle and high school teachers and 13 of their students volunteered to participate. All students and six out of seven teachers self-identified as Black, Latinx, or multiracial. At the kickoff meeting, teachers shared some of their reasons for joining:

I hope students get the chance to reflect on the complexities of their identities while working to support one another in the process.

One of my hopes and dreams is to provide an opportunity for students of color, particularly Black students who are typically overrepresented in special education and disciplinary placements, to be valued in schools and classrooms.

I would love for voices to be heard and actions adjusted. Our students need us.

"I learned how to create safe space for dialogue about race."

TEACHER

"I learned that I belong."

STUDENT

Soon after the Collaborative ended, the impact was already seen beyond the participants. Tiffany Huit, Deputy Chief of Teaching and Learning for Dallas ISD, said, "We're adjusting instructional practices and tools and employing culturally relevant texts to help educators more skillfully navigate discussions and include student voices."


Building Empathy Through Stories

Building empathy among participants was the group's first priority. During the first session, teachers and students used story-based questions to interview one another about their experiences with race and racism. The facilitation team focused on creating conditions for story-sharing that provided safety and confidentiality for both students and teachers.

Four powerful themes emerged across interviews.

THEME 1

Students and teachers of color experience and witness racism in school.


 *I was humiliated by a substitute teacher in the hallway because I didn't know how to speak English very well. She told me that this is the United States of America and I should learn how to speak English. -Student*

In sixth grade, the Asian students used to always get picked on by the Black, white, and Hispanic kids. I didn't speak up and I regret it. I could have spoken up and changed the situation. If I had talked about Asian culture maybe they would have listened. I was kept from speaking up because of the popular girl group who would shut me down. -Student

A parent did not want her children in my class because she wanted all their teachers to be white. She removed them from my class. -Teacher

THEME 2


Students want to feel their racial identity is valued and respected.

 *I know people who have felt like their identity has been, you know, disrespected or not valued enough. -Student*

A low point is when there are other students who don't respect others and talk about our traditions. -Student


THEME 3

Students want safe spaces to talk about race and to learn how to disrupt racism.

 *I feel more comfortable talking about race when I know that the person I'm talking to isn't going to judge me and isn't going to make me feel bad about it. -Student*

I feel comfortable talking about race to people who are willing to understand where they are coming from and are willing to listen. I don't want to be judged. -Student

Some students described how racial affinity spaces were one place they felt safe talking about race:

 *I feel empowered to speak and comfortable being around other Black people. -Student*

I would rather talk to someone with the same skin color as me because we could relate more because everyone has that one point in life when they didn't fit in and were being judged on their skin color. -Student

EMPATHY INTERVIEW


Empathy means listening with humility and trying to more deeply understand the experiences and feelings of other people. In the Collaborative, students and teachers used story-based questions like those below to build empathy for one another and uncover unacknowledged needs.

- Tell me about a time you talked about race. What did you talk about? How did you feel during and after the conversation?
- What has made you feel safe or comfortable when talking about race? What wouldn't you want to see?
- What would you like to talk about regarding race/racism? With whom? How?
- Tell me about a time you wanted to talk about race but didn't/couldn't. What did you want to talk about? Why didn't the conversation happen?
- Tell me about a time you witnessed or experienced racism in school. How did it make you feel?



THEME 4

Students want to learn more about race, including but not limited to: the history of race, intersectionality, Black Lives Matter, enslavement, police brutality, terminology, and their own racial identity.

 *In history in 6th grade we were talking about what happened with the slaves. I wanted to get more in depth about why the whites hated them and why they put them in slavery. I couldn't ask my teacher because I wasn't comfortable because he wasn't the same color as me. I felt like I had less information but I couldn't ask him because it was kind of rude. -Student*

I want to learn more about the Black Lives Matter movement. Why do people not agree with it? Why do people think that the movement is more than black lives mattering? -Student

I would like to talk about what happened to help us get to where we are now. What did people do to get us our freedom? People don't understand the history of our race. -Student

Students and teachers then confirmed these themes with information from additional interviews they had conducted with friends, colleagues, and family members as homework.

FOUR POWERFUL THEMES EMERGED FROM INTERVIEWS

- 1 Students and teachers of color **experience and witness racism in school.**
- 2 Students want to feel their **racial identity is valued and respected.**
- 3 Students want a **safe space** to talk about race and to learn how to disrupt racism.
- 4 Students want to **learn more about race**, including but not limited to: the history of race, intersectionality, Black Lives Matter, enslavement, police brutality, terminology, and their own racial identity.

Focus on Racial Identity Development

The project team considered all of the themes from student and teacher stories. Based on team members' experience with supporting schools to become anti-racist, they recognized that the first priority was to help students and teachers explore and affirm their own identities. To help build understanding of their personal racial journeys, students and teachers engaged in a few specific activities.

In one activity, students and teachers unpacked their racial experiences within racial affinity groups. In another activity, teachers completed culturally-centered pedagogy reflection questions to examine their own experiences and perspectives and then discussed these questions as a group. Students and teachers also co-created a formative questionnaire that teachers could use to understand students' familial, community, and school experience with their own racial identity. Teachers used the questionnaire with their whole class and then used this data to inform their pedagogical approach with the lessons.

Students' feedback confirmed that they valued work on their racial identity.



I learned it is ok to be yourself and be brave and speak your truth.

I learned that I like to communicate my feelings about race and my identity.

I learned that I did not know a lot about myself and I have a lot of learning to do.

"I learned that no matter my race, I am me and no one can take that away from me."

STUDENT

These experiences created a foundation for the students and teachers to engage in lesson development as a community.

Structure of the Design Collaborative

Students and teachers met four times over three months (November 2020–January 2021) with homework in between sessions.

SESSION 1	SESSION 2	SESSION 3	SESSION 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcome and connection Affirming our identities Journey mapping Introduction to Liberatory Design Empathy interviews Next steps Gratitude circle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcome and connection Empathy homework review Racial affinity space Exploring themes from empathy interviews Gratitude circle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher group: Share + debrief reflection questions homework Welcome and connection Explore and critique classroom questionnaire about identity Choose priority questionnaire Gratitude circle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcome and connection Lesson overview and example Explore the 6 lessons in school teams Teacher group: Implementation Student group: Discuss imposter syndrome Implementation planning Gratitude circle
<p>HOMEWORK: Empathy interviews with family, friends, colleagues</p>	<p>HOMEWORK: Teachers complete culturally-centered pedagogy reflection questions</p>	<p>HOMEWORK: Teachers implement revised student questionnaire about identity</p>	<p>HOMEWORK: Teachers begin implementing the lessons</p>

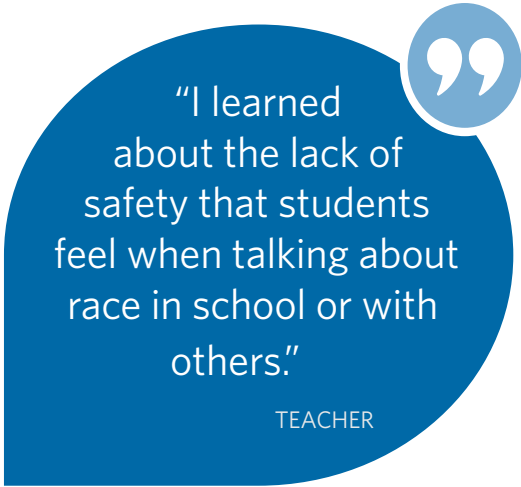
Classroom Lessons on Race and Racism

Who am I? What is my role in combating racism? These are the central questions in six classroom lessons that emerged from the Collaborative. The lessons explore the complexity and uniqueness of an individual's racial identity and the connection to community and social identity. The table below describes each topic and the related learning questions.

LESSON	TOPIC	KEY LEARNING QUESTIONS
Lesson 1	Setting the Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How will we create a space that is safe for uncomfortable conversations about race? What is our shared understanding of the vocabulary in our journey?
Lesson 2	Race in America	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did we get here? Where do we go from here? What is your role as an individual?
Lesson 3	Who am I? Part 1 (Personal Identity)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What makes up your personal identity?
Lesson 4	Who am I? Part 2 (Racial Identity)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What makes me who I am? What experiences have shaped my racial identity development?
Lesson 5	History of Race and Racism in Texas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the history of race/racism in your state? How has it played out in your community?
Lesson 6	Who am I? Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How have you been impacted by race/racism? What can you do to make a difference?

The lessons are flexible, offering teachers choices within each lesson and freedom to adapt materials based on their classrooms' content and context. This is critical given that teachers, just like students, have a range of different experiences creating racially affirming spaces.

All lessons serve as a guide to help students unpack their identities, while providing opportunities to explore deeper understandings of race and racism within the contexts of local communities and across the United States. Students are invited to engage in meaningful discussions and collaborative activities with their peers to explore multiple perspectives.



“I learned about the lack of safety that students feel when talking about race in school or with others.”

TEACHER

Each lesson begins by setting the tone for conversations about race with a discussion of four agreements adapted from *Courageous Conversations about Race* by Glenn Singleton.



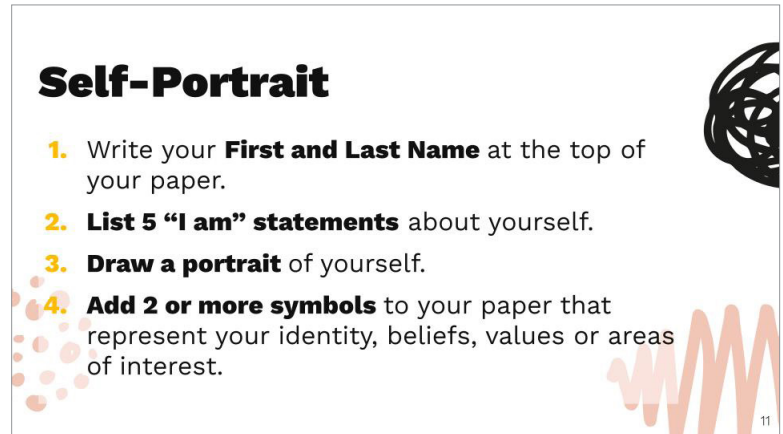
Four Agreements

1. Stay Engaged
2. Experience Discomfort
3. Speak Your Truth
4. Expect and Accept Non-closure

Discomfort = Growth.

3

This self-portrait exercise from lesson 3 comes after learning and discussion about personal identity, social identities and intersectionality.



Self-Portrait

1. Write your **First and Last Name** at the top of your paper.
2. **List 5 “I am” statements** about yourself.
3. **Draw a portrait** of yourself.
4. **Add 2 or more symbols** to your paper that represent your identity, beliefs, values or areas of interest.

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The lessons culminate with students working with a partner on a project that addresses the questions: What has been the impact of race on our lives? and How can we actively fight against racism?



How has race impacted our lives?

Lesson 6

1

Teachers commented:



The lessons are in depth. They push learners to reflect on the origins of racism.

I like how the lessons have diverse strategies that encompass lower level and higher level questioning. I love how it makes the students dig deep into their own experiences.

I like how the lessons start with exploring students' own identity and expanding their knowledge about race and racism, then explore how they have been affected, then move to how they can be effective in impacting change.

The lessons are ready for implementation in the Collaborative, but not yet for wider distribution. They need to be tested by teachers in ways that fit their context and classroom, in order to learn through experience how to improve the lessons for subsequent implementation.



Beyond Lessons: Building Racially Affirming Learning Spaces

The Collaborative confirmed what most educators already know: teaching about race and racism requires more than simply implementing a lesson or two. It requires building a racially affirming classroom environment where students feel safe and respected. It requires teachers to explore their own racial identity. It requires support and affirmation from all levels of the system to value the time and space to learn about race. And, it requires centering the students themselves to understand their experiences and support their identity.

One teacher commented:

This is one of the reasons I went into education; to teach lessons like these. One of the main reasons I went into education is to teach the things my generation didn't learn in school. But there isn't always space like this to collaborate on something so powerful.

"It is so important to hold spaces for our kids, especially where our country is at. Race really does affect their everyday life. School should allow spaces for this. I really valued working with students and creating a vehicle for that kind of work to take place."

TEACHER

The students and teachers who began this journey together during the three-month collaborative are continuing to learn from their experience. All of the participants and partners hope that peers from across Dallas ISD—and across the country—will be inspired to join them.



**COMMUNITY
DESIGN
PARTNERS**

Community Design Partners is a team of facilitators, coaches, and advisors. We partner with organizations and schools dedicated to a wide range of social justice issues. We work with teams to deeply understand a problem and see the systems where the problem is rooted. We collaboratively design change ideas, measure implementation, and monitor outcomes. We take a strengths-based approach and help teams center the voices of those they aim to serve.



Be Gr8rr Educational Consulting is committed to dismantling all notions of white supremacy culture within the U.S. education system until Black students thrive. Our team of anti-racist coaches are armed with educational expertise and lived racial experiences that inform our coaching strategies. We critically challenge teams and individuals to grow in their knowledge as racial beings, while simultaneously influencing racially sound professional growth.



The **Institute for Learning** (IFL) works to ensure that every student—especially those traditionally underserved due to income, race, and language—has access to high-level texts, tasks, and high-quality learning opportunities to build the critical thinking and deep reasoning skills that are required for success. We believe that the way to achieve equitable and sustainable change is to focus on coherent, evidence-based learning for all educators.



The **Dallas Independent School District** sits in the heart of a large, diverse, and dynamic region with a metropolitan population of 6.5 million people. The school district serves approximately 154,000 students in pre-kindergarten through the 12th grade. Approximately 70 percent of students served by Dallas ISD are Hispanic/Latino and 21 percent are Black/African American.

Deputy Chief of Teaching and Learning for Dallas ISD Tiffany Huitt has worked with administration in the rollout of this Collaborative within the network. “The writing exercises, empathy interviews and explorations into the origins of race and racism mirror the anti-racism efforts that have been underway in our district since 2017,” she said. “The result is that students, teachers, and administrators are more aware and have greater self-confidence and agency speaking up about race and speaking out against racist practices.”

The IFL/Dallas ISD Network for School Improvement (NSI) is a collaboration between the Institute for Learning (IFL), the Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC), and the Center for Urban (CUE) Education at the University of Pittsburgh and Dallas ISD leadership. The NSI Hub supports teams from 14 schools to use continuous improvement methods to increase the number of African American, Latino, English learners, and low-income students who are on-track at the end of 9th grade for college and career readiness. The work is occurring in English language arts over 5 years (2018–23) with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many hands and hearts helped bring this publication to life. Of these, the most important are the students and teachers from Zan Holmes Middle School, Wilmer-Hutchins High School, and Kimball High School who spent time learning with and listening to each other. We thank each and all of them for sharing their experiences.