

Understanding Race and Privilege: Suggestions for Facilitating Challenging Conversations

School psychologists are trained to practice in a variety of settings. While some are faculty members who are responsible for preparing graduate students, others are practitioners who serve students and families in schools and other community-based settings. These roles position school psychologists to influence systems change; however, this is often a significant and challenging undertaking, particularly when addressing sensitive issues such as race and privilege. Regardless of work setting or role function, it is incumbent upon school psychologists to be as prepared as possible to manage potentially challenging reactions to these topics. With thoughtful, deliberate planning, though, it can be done.

Albeit cliché, school psychologists who seek to discuss the realities of race, privilege, and discrimination are inevitably engaging in *courageous conversations*. In short, and specifically related to professionals working in educational settings, because of its subject matter, courageous conversations are likely uncomfortable and difficult, but nonetheless necessary discussions in which we must engage in order to better serve students, families, schools, and communities. And while those amongst us who desire to bring these issues to the forefront of our respective settings and systems (e.g., schools, school districts, or departments of special education and psychological services) are likely committed to advancing social justice and equity as a profession, it is, nonetheless, important to offer a few helpful suggestions to facilitate the process. Below are suggestions to help school psychologists effectively manage resistance that may occur when engaging in these critical but sometimes difficult conversations.

1. ***Examine your own implicit biases.*** Despite our training as education and mental health professionals, like others with whom we serve, school psychologists are shaped by our personal experiences and interactions with the world around us, which makes us vulnerable to implicit bias. Unlike explicit bias (which reflects the attitudes or beliefs that one endorses at a conscious level), implicit bias is the bias in judgment or behavior that results from subtle cognitive processes (e.g., implicit attitudes and implicit stereotypes) that often operate at a level below conscious awareness and without intentional control. For school psychologists who serve students, families, staff, and communities in a variety of settings, implicit bias is particularly dangerous because it can influence our behavior and decisions, especially when we are faced with ambiguous and subjective situations.
2. ***Start small.*** Change takes time. For this reason, school psychologists are encouraged to be particularly thoughtful and strategic about the manner in which they initiate sessions about race and privilege in their respective settings. For example, beginning with a small cohort of trusted colleagues (e.g., other psychologists or even teachers and administrators) would be helpful to build institutional support for addressing race, privilege, and discrimination. Starting small allows

school psychologists an opportunity to receive constructive feedback from participants that can inform future sessions with potentially larger audiences.

3. **Ensure participation is voluntary.** In consultation with the appropriate administrators (i.e., building principals or central office personnel), school psychologists are encouraged to consider whether mandatory participation is most beneficial for long-term impact. Relatedly, discussing institutional dynamics with a variety of stakeholders can help to create an effective strategy to prepare participants for the upcoming session(s). For example, a series of mini professional development opportunities could be offered to staff members to expose them to the constructs of race and privilege. These opportunities can begin to build background knowledge, which then may allow for a more productive and advanced follow-up session on the topics.
4. **Use counseling techniques.** School psychologists have the skills to effectively manage resistance and change. Facilitators may wish to lead conversations and activities around race, privilege, and discrimination in a manner similar to facilitating meetings with parents or other staff members around sensitive topics. Drawing upon effective counseling techniques—such as active listening, clarification, paraphrasing, reflection, summarization, and validating the perspectives of participants while refraining from offering judgmental responses—will likely be helpful.
5. **Open the door.** It is important to consider the developmental preparedness and openness of our colleagues to these ideas. For some, these conversations will be the first time they have engaged in a critical discussion of race and privilege. School psychologists should refrain from becoming defensive or trying to further explain concepts some participants might not understand or be unwilling to accept. As facilitators of these sessions, school psychologists should adopt a mindset to raise awareness of the reality of race and privilege. In time, these ideas can be revisited and expounded upon in subsequent sessions after participants have been allowed to process the initial information.

For additional suggestions, please see the “Important Notes for Facilitators” section of the *Understanding Race and Privilege Lesson Plan and Activity Guide for Professionals*.

Tune in to #SP4SJ, a podcast series related to social justice for practitioners, graduate educators, and graduate students, which discusses encountering and overcoming resistance to the concept of and need for intentional work towards social justice. This podcast, rolled out during the 2017–2018 school year, is available at <http://www.nasponline.org/podcasts/SP4SJ>.

Contributors: Elizabeth A’Vant & Charles Barrett

© 2017, National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814, 301-657-0270, www.nasponline.org

Please cite this document as:

National Association of School Psychologists. (2017). *Understanding Race and Privilege: Suggestions for Facilitating Challenging Conversations* [handout]. Bethesda, MD: Author.