Minority Voices in Education:
A Playbook for Uncomfortable Conversations About Race

Abstract

Oftentimes, during a conversation (even while speaking the same language), educators and their respective students are not engaging in authentic dialogue. Now, more than ever, hot topic conversations regarding race are becoming more prevalent in schools across America regardless of age. This means K-12 educators can be faced with choosing to ignore or address unexpected questions or side conversations students may have in their classrooms. To supply educators with tools to build better communication amongst them and their students, a webinar series was designed to guide them on how to create a playbook. The playbook included strategies to organize active and intentional engagement in uncomfortable conversations presented to educators. This paper introduces the playbook and serves as a starting place for stakeholders to begin the work of preparing educators to become engaged in culturally responsive practices through informal conversations surrounding social issues.

Keywords: playbook, students of color, culturally responsive, educators, conversations, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math)

Introduction

The year 2020 for America is branded by the COVID-19 pandemic, social justice protests, and deadly wildfires in California. The implications of each of these life-altering events vary across socioeconomic and racial identities. George Floyd's murder in May of 2020 sparked unrest in Black America and racism was finally named the country's biggest threat (Ifill, 2018). Educators from every corner of America, much like the rest of the

world, have been tasked with choosing a side. The unique responsibility of producing the next generation of professionals is accompanied by the authority to dismantle racists ideologies or perpetuate those threats during the most critical years of a child's life in an effort to mold them as a positive contribution to society.

Purpose of the Present Study

Even educators who have wished to nurture children all their lives are struggling to respond to issues around race. Many are now questioning how even the best teacher education programs can prepare novice educators to engage in unforeseen conversations with their future students relating to life-altering events such as the senseless killings of unarmed Black and Brown people. These conversations cannot be avoided if educators want to connect with their students and be received as an authentic teacher who cares. This present paper serves to address the need for educators to begin to feel comfortable while having uncomfortable conversations with their students and offer strategies on how to do so.

You Don't Have to Lie to Kick It: Dismantling Myths

In responding to questions and concerns about race, one might assume that there is an unspoken requirement for educators to adopt the attitudes and cultures of the students they serve. Take a moment to destroy that belief. It is both appropriate and necessary for educators to show up to their classroom, each day, as their whole self, inviting students of all backgrounds and identities to do the same. The task at hand for those in education in these sensitive times is to be open to learning more from the students they served versus assuming their students can only learn from them. Opinions are self-owned and are shaped by personal experiences, beliefs, and status in society. Albeit, each student in the classroom

carries their own opinion, uniquely constructed by their worldview. These same individuals desire to be heard and seen.

A History of Silence

For every child, there is an insatiable desire to communicate and relate with the world around them. For a child living in a body that has been historically vilified and labeled inferior to the mainstream, this need can be exacerbated. Ladson-Billings (1999) serves as a reminder of the origin of the cultural deprivation/disadvantaged paradigm, in which White middle-class cultural preferences were situated as the norm, silencing the cultures, contributions, and ideas of marginalized people. She later outlined three approaches to education based on the paradigm. The learning facilitated by the learners' own social and cultural backgrounds approach by Ladson-Billings (1999) is noteworthy in this work as it aligns closely with the importance of having certain conversations with students of color.

Lifting Student Voice

There is no doubt that using the cultural and social backgrounds of students to guide teaching is both controversial and popular in education right now. Widely used hashtags parading culturally responsive teaching are full of photos and clips of educators celebrating ethnic traditions, holidays, and celebrations. What continues to be ignored by educators are the issues most prevalent in the lives of Black and Brown students, like oppression, White supremacy, and inequities (Gay, 2013). The realization, and subsequent transformation, that is necessary for educators to authentically engage with students from marginalized groups is a gradual and deliberate endeavor.

Play Your Part: Strategies for Tackling Uncomfortable Conversations About Race

A *playbook* uses an approach or strategy to reflect a plan in advance of the action needing to take place (Woods, 2018). In the interactive webinar series titled, *STEM Talks: Edifying Minority Voices in the STEM Classroom & Beyond* (Johnson, et.al., 2020), participants were invited to engage in conversations surrounding achievement and opportunity gaps in our schools in the interest of enhancing the schooling experiences of all students in urban school settings. Educators and stakeholders from various backgrounds were encouraged to create action plans and playbooks to serve as a guide in supporting and uplifting students in the urban STEM classroom and far beyond.

The strategies and resources shared below serve as entries in a playbook for educators interested in responding to and facilitating open dialogue surrounding race and other social issues. Much like a coach uses a playbook to lead players to victory, educators can use this playbook as a tool to better serve their students during these times of social tension.

Cogenerative Dialogues

It can be intimidating to think of ways to celebrate and include all of the diverse voices of students as a whole in the classroom. Dr. Chris Emdin (2016) took notes from his students to implement cogenerative dialogues, or cogens, in his urban science classroom as a method of making space for students to share their perspectives about the class culture and teaching practices. The cogen is modeled after rap cyphers, prevalent in Hip Hop, considering the traditions of Black and Brown urban youth and validating the value that each student shares in the space (Emdin, 2016). The model includes a plethora of strategies that can be viewed as steps to work towards the inclusiveness of students and

deemed important to include in the *playbook.* Some strategies have been simplified by the researchers and include the following:

Step 1: Understand the Purpose of the Cogen

The overall purpose of cogenerative dialogues in education is to gain information about the learning environment and all aspects of teaching practices from students.

Step 2: Identify Appropriate Participants

The broad differences of the class must first be identified and analyzed before cogens are implemented. One may elect to maintain a journal of observed differences, including interests, experiences, and ethnicity.

Step 3: Invite Opposites

Once the demographic makeup of the classroom is thoroughly analyzed, a small group of students representing the diversity of the class should be invited to engage in the initial "secret" cogen. Students from marginalized groups may be more reluctant to agree to take part in an activity so intimate, as their schooling experiences likely taught them that they are only singled out for misbehavior. Therefore, it is more important the invitation respects students' time and status in the school community.

Step 4: Make the Space

The educational cypher space should be arranged to allow for participants to face each other and connect through eye contact. The room may be situated to invite students to share their ideas comfortably, including snacks, soft music, or oil diffusers. A major part of making the space is establishing rules that apply to all participants and the teacher. *Rule 1* should address the need for all voices to be

heard equally, *Rule 2* is the "one mic" rule and reminds participants that only one voice should be heard at a time, and finally, *Rule 3* asserts that these cogen dialogues are a safe space to problem-solve and produce action steps to improve the classroom culture.

Step 5: Spark the Conversation

Student participants need to be made aware of the privilege associated with their membership in this small group. They will be responsible for influencing what happens in the classroom and should be encouraged to forge their titles or names. Cogens are typically student-led, but the initial dialogue will need to be facilitated by the teacher, with the presentation of a mutual issue that can be easily solved within the group.

Step 6: Take it Home

When a plan of action is outlined in the initial cogen dialogue, this is an opportunity for the teacher to implement the practice during the group's next class. This instant gratification establishes the idea that their work in the cogen group is impactful and will result in improved classroom practices (Emdin, 2016).

Zinn Education Project: Teaching People's History

Launched in 2008, the Zinn Education Project is an organization that serves to expand the minds, perspectives, and beliefs of students through the history of people beyond traditional textbooks. The website (Figure 1) features countless free resources to be included in a playbook, including projects, activities, and artifacts for educators to use and share with their students.

Figure 1

Zinn Education Project Website, 2020

Note. This image is the main webpage (https://www.zinnedproject.org/). In the public domain.

Digital Resources: Creating Safe Spaces in the Virtual World

Flipgrid is a digital resource for educators who wish to incorporate the convenience of social media to convey ideas and relay messages in the form of short videos. Questions or prompts are posed and students are invited to engage in healthy video discussions. In the aforementioned webinar series, participants were given a prompt (Figure 2) and responded via Flipgrid (Figure 3) to simulate how it can be used to begin conversations in their classroom.

Figure 2

Webinar Prompt, 2020

Note. This image is a screenshot from the Webinar presentation. This prompt acted as a conversation starter to facilitate a discussion surrounding uncomfortable conversations about racial and social conflicts.

Figure 3

*Flipgrid Response to Webinar Prompt, 2020*
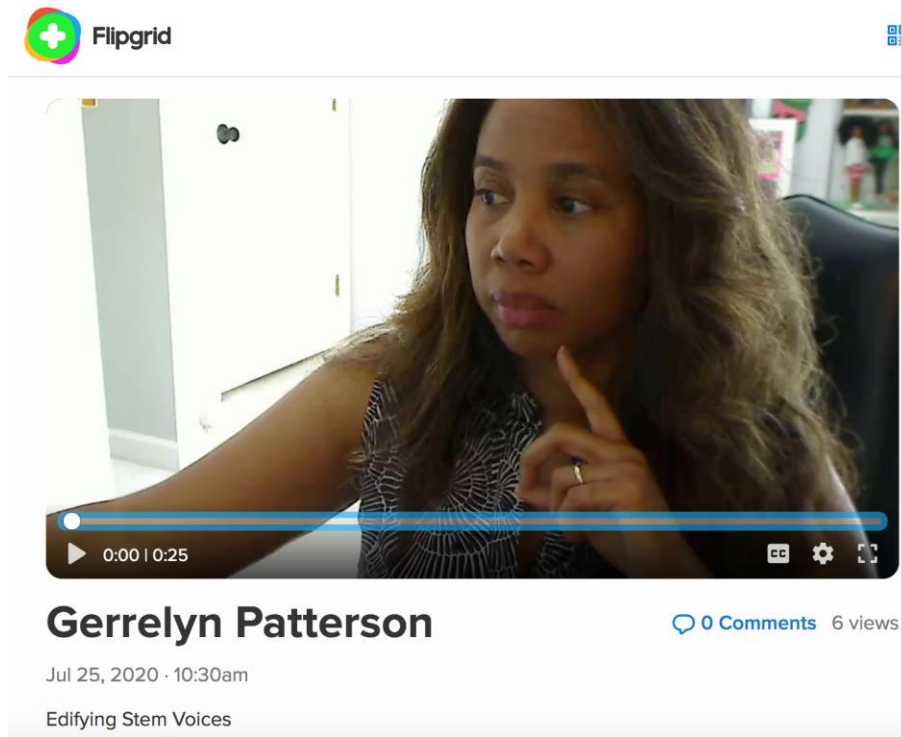
Note. This image is a screenshot of a recorded response from a Webinar participant (the recorded response can be found here https://flipgrid.com/cdee335f).

Nearpod is one of the leading digital platforms for teaching and learning. Entire districts have opted to support the implementation of Nearpod, as it provides educators and students opportunities to engage with each other, and with the content in various ways during virtual learning. Google Slides or Powerpoint presentations come alive with Nearpod's Live Participation mode, equipped with formative assessment tools, virtual field trips, virtual experiments, discussion boards, and even educational games serving as a great play to be included in a playbook.
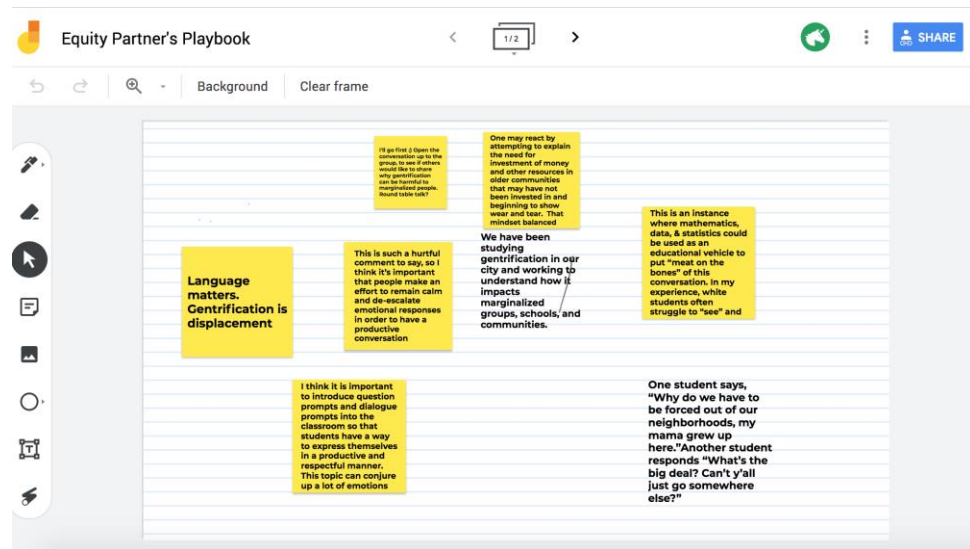
Figure 4

Sample Prompt Used in Nearpod, 2020
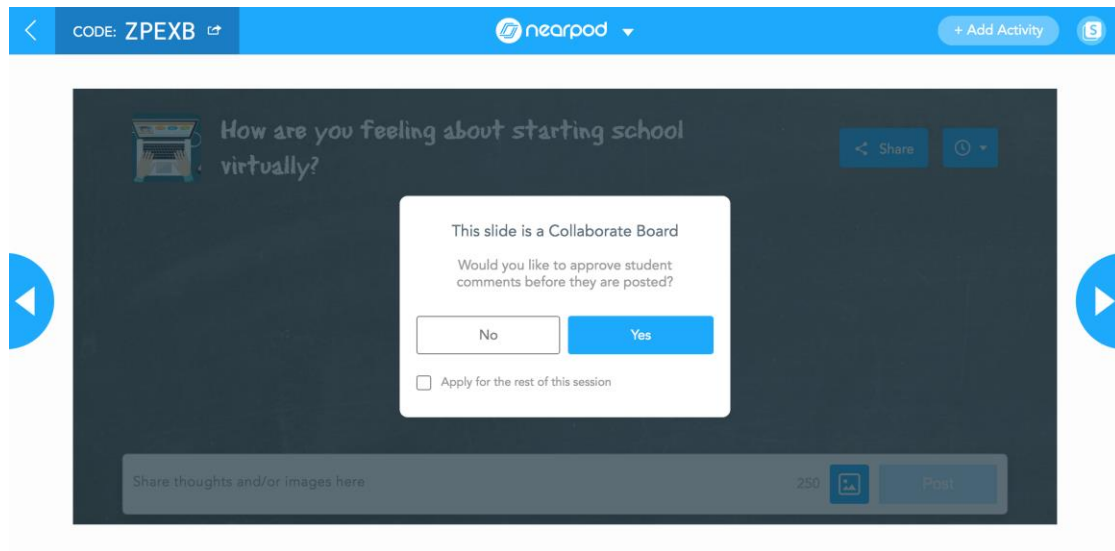
> *Note.* This is a screenshot of a prompt created in Nearpod to facilitate dialogue regarding a hot topic of interest.

Google Jamboard is a G Suite resource that enhances collaboration and engagement during virtual learning. Jamboards can be incorporated into daily lessons or implemented as a tool for students to use in collaborative learning groups. During the webinar series, participants were able to view, practice and understand how jamboards (Figure 5) can play an intricate role as a part of their playbook.

Figure 5

Equity Partner's Playbook Jamboard, 2020

Note. This is a screenshot of a Google Jamboard that participants were invited to use to share their ideas regarding the prompt (see Figure 1).

Conclusion

The word edify is synonymous with words like benefit, uplift, and illuminate. The webinar series, STEM Talks: Edifying Minority Voices in the STEM Classroom & Beyond (Johnson et al, 2020), was designed to benefit, uplift, and illuminate the voices, perspectives, and experiences of Black and Brown students in education. In times of social unrest, classrooms can serve as safe spaces for children from marginalized groups. A living playbook can serve as a guide for educators working to create that safe space for their students. While it is only a beginning, and these strategies will grow and evolve, to do nothing at all would be a grave disservice to the future of our nation.

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