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OPINION

Classroom Q & A With Larry Ferlazzo

An award-winning English and Social Studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif., Larry Ferlazzo is the author of *Helping Students Motivate Themselves: Practical Answers To Classroom Challenges*, *The ESL/ELL Teacher's Survival Guide*, and *Building Parent Engagement In Schools*. He also maintains the popular *Websites of the Day* blog. In this EdWeek blog, an experiment in knowledge-gathering, he will address readers' questions on classroom management, ELL instruction, lesson planning, and other issues facing teachers. Send your questions to [lferlazzo@epe.org](mailto:lferlazzo@epe.org). And offer your own thoughts and responses in the comments section.

## What should teachers learn from the murder of George Floyd? Six Recommendations for Educators

Oman Frame and Martha Caldwell

*This article was a submission we were invited to make to Larry Ferlazzo's Classroom Q&A column in Edweek. It was published as part of a series on how educators can respond to George Floyd's murder and the ensuing social response. The article was published on June 6, 2020. The full series can be found [here](#).*

We begin by acknowledging that our Black friends, colleagues, and students are hurting. In the midst of a global pandemic that disproportionately impacts their families and communities, they are again forced to bear witness to cruel and senseless acts of violence against Black bodies. As we mourn the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, we remember Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and so many others. Our collective grief calls us to face 400 years of state violence that still visits inequity, fear, and intergenerational trauma on Black communities.

No more sitting on the sidelines watching someone else do the work. No neutral place of refuge in the comfort of color blindness. Now is the time for everyone to take a stand. We have serious work ahead, and it's not going to be easy. Racism is an open wound, and no band aid fix will help it. Healing will take strong medicine and time.

Many educators have already laid the foundations for change, and if you have, be prepared to lead the way. If you're new to the movement, the power of your convictions will lead you to the people and [resources](#) you need. Here's the approach we recommend.

1. **Start with yourself.** Before you begin teaching students about racism, you have to do some internal work. Schooling is based in white middle class culture, and as such, it conditions us to think instead of feel. We learn to devalue emotions and elevate the intellect. Yet feelings buried alive never die. They live under the surface of consciousness and sabotage our thinking. The distorted thinking that emerges can only enact harm.

Racism is irrational. It cannot be reasoned away. It operates through the repression of the human emotions that connect us to each other. Only through sitting with feelings of grief and sadness, guilt and shame, anger and powerlessness, can we process our way from pain to power. Allow your feelings. Honor them as the sacred signals they are, telling you that all is not well. Hold space for yourself and for those you love to process and transmute these difficult feelings so they can inform and enlighten you.

2. **Find a community of resistance.** Grief is not easy to process alone, so it behooves us to do the work of grieving together. Surround yourself with a community of like-minded people who share your commitment to dismantling racism. Start or join an anti-racist book club, a people of color peer affinity group, or an anti-racist white educators' group. These groups operate as sanctuaries for educators to share stories, experience, ideas, and resources. Such communities are invaluable ways to encourage and support each other's development as anti-racist educators and reinforce the race conscious work we are called to do together.
3. **Listen, listen, and then listen again.** Center the experience of your Black students and colleagues. First, listen with the intent of empowering their voices. Second, listen to learn. They are living and breathing the politics of race every day. Racial profiling and the fear of violence is a common theme in most of their lives. Provide a safe environment for them to share their experiences if they choose to. They live close to the problem, and they are better positioned to lead the way toward solutions. Follow their lead.
4. **Stay focused on the root causes of injustice.** Don't be distracted by controversies over how people are protesting. Maintain a clear focus on why. Frame and reframe conversations as many times as necessary to highlight the historical roots of systemic oppression.
5. **Know and teach the history of race.** Racism cannot be understood by well-meaning people without understanding history. A survey of U.S. history – slavery, Jim Crow, debt peonage, unfair housing practices, inequitable access to banking, healthcare, and education, restrictions on citizenship and voting, the rise of the prison industrial complex – reveals the causes of systemic inequities that still plague us today. In facing our past, we can connect current social situations to the historical causes that gave rise to them.
6. **Teach resistance and resilience.** There's far more to the story of Black Americans than oppression, so balance the narrative you teach with the history of excellence and accomplishment. The lives of Black Americans are centered around resilience, love, energy, joy, and survival. The Black experience has not occurred in a vacuum of despair. Black Americans have overcome insurmountable obstacles and have still found ways to be joyous, grateful, and gracious.

We can unpack and unlearn racism, and by working together, we can empower the next generation to change the trajectory of history. Now is the time to step up our game. Welcome to the movement. It's time to get busy

Oman Frame and Martha Caldwell, authors of [\*Let's Get Real: Exploring Race, Class, and Gender Identities in the Classroom\*](#) (Routledge 2017) are veteran educators and co-founders of [iChange Collaborative](#). They provide diversity, equity and inclusion consulting, professional development training, online courses and identity resource groups for educators.