



# Is NYC Preparing Teachers to Be Culturally Responsive?

## Data Snapshot

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### Introduction

In this volatile political time when racism and bias are increasingly visible in politics and the media, young people are looking to schools to help them understand the world and themselves. In an era when Charlottesville, Parkland, #MeToo, NFL protests, deportations, and the rollback of protections for LGBTQ people dominate the news, issues of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual identity are on young people's minds and hearts. Schools and teachers make choices daily about whether they should ignore or attempt to respond to these issues. They decide how to handle questions from students and tensions that arise in their classrooms, and they ultimately decide whether to leverage these situations to stimulate student engagement, learning and growth, or not.

Neuroscience and education research show that young people learn best when they feel connected to and understood by their teachers, and when their academic pursuits are linked to their everyday lives, social contexts, and passions. <sup>1</sup> Culturally responsive instructional strategies build those connections and advance learning by engaging young people where they live intellectually, socially and emotionally.

The NYU Metropolitan Center for Equity and the Transformation of Schools (NYU Metro Center) surveyed 382 NYC public school teachers (representative of the overall demographics of NYC teachers and schools) to identify their willingness and capacity to raise and respond to issues of race, ethnicity and other identities in the classroom, to adopt culturally responsive practices and expand their teaching capacities. <sup>2</sup>

Because teachers who are comfortable with topics of race and ethnicity are more likely to fill out a survey on these topics, the survey results may well over-represent teachers' comfort levels. This is a sampling bias we could not avoid or correct for in a voluntary survey.

Thank you to Dr. H. Richard Milner at the University of Pittsburgh for sharing his national survey on this topic <sup>3</sup>, and Education Week Research Center for sharing their survey on current events which we used as a foundation. <sup>4</sup>

## Finding 1:

### Many NYC Teachers Feel It Is Important to Engage Topics of Race, Ethnicity and Other Identities in their Classrooms and Curriculum

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+ The vast majority of respondents (89%) agree/strongly agree that issues of race and ethnicity are relevant to their students' educational experiences.

+ The vast majority of respondents (87%) agree/strongly agree that it is teachers' responsibility to help students acquire the skills to critically understand, analyze and respond to issues related to race and ethnicity.

+ The vast majority of respondents (70%) agree/strongly agree that under the Common Core framework, issues of race and ethnicity can be incorporated into the curriculum.

+ The vast majority of respondents (93%) would be willing to modify their lessons to connect with students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

+ The vast majority of respondents (82%) feel it is the role of teachers to help students acquire the skills to critically understand, analyze and respond to issues related to gender and sexual identity.

+ The majority of respondents (69%) feel comfortable referring to students by the gender pronoun they prefer, even if that pronoun may not match their biological sex.

## Samples of Teachers' Comments

"Racial identity is very important to establish the educational partnership with my students. It creates a safe and trustworthy learning environment where my students and I feel valued in every aspect."

*-Brooklyn middle school science teacher*

"I completely support spreading the celebration of ethnicity and culture and believe there is a direct correlation between it and the confidence our students have in their sense of self and belonging."

*-Bronx middle school social studies teacher*

"I teach ancient global history. I'm always looking for content ways to connect to students' backgrounds with my content and to bring in an understanding about social constructions of race, as well as class and gender. I still feel like I'm learning more about the pedagogy part of that: practices that connect with the cultures that students bring to the classroom."

*-Manhattan high school history teacher*

"Students need to see equality in their learning experiences to be fully engaged. When learning is not culturally relevant students do not actively participate which results in lower grades, passive learning and behavioral issues."

*-Manhattan middle school social studies teacher*

“Students need to relate to the lessons that I teach them. That isn’t possible when all the reading books have children that don’t have similar names, skin color, life experiences and culture as them.”

-Brooklyn elementary school teacher

“The topic of race and how to discuss it with students has come up several times at my school, and myself along with several co-workers are always trying to figure out how to incorporate it into lessons effectively and appropriately.”

-Bronx middle school math teacher

“Race and ethnicity are issues that have come up and need to be addressed. Race and ethnicity shape the perspectives of students and part of our jobs is to expose them to different perspectives they may encounter.”

-Bronx middle school social studies teacher

“My students struggle with math, so to engage them in the content I will often incorporate their names, places from the area around our school, and aspects of the culture they’ve shared with me. I have also had one-on-one talks with some students about race and society.”

-Bronx elementary school teacher

“I think that it is important to make connections to students lives and experiences to make connections to the content that is being explored in the classroom.”

-Bronx elementary school teacher

“The strongest learning comes from connections. So, if there isn’t a true connection—including racial or ethnic—how can we be effective as educators?”

-Bronx middle school English Language Arts teacher

“Students will connect with a lesson, if they can see themselves in the subject matter. It is important for students to feel included in what is being discussed and taught. So yes, I would modify my lesson in order to connect with students’ racial and ethnic backgrounds and experiences.”

-Brooklyn elementary school art teacher

## Finding 2:

### NYC Teachers Report a Lack of Training, Tools and Support to Engage Topics of Race, Ethnicity and Other Identities in their Classrooms

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- + Fewer than one in three respondents (29%) agree/strongly agree that they receive continuous professional development on how to discuss issues of race and ethnicity in the classroom. Of this group, only 10% strongly agree.
- + Fewer than one in three respondents (31%) agree/strongly agree that their teacher education programs prepared them to address issues of race and ethnicity in the classroom.
- + Fewer than half of respondents (41%) agree/strongly agree that they have access to resources that help them discuss issues of race and ethnicity in their classroom.
- + One in three respondents (33%) agree/strongly agree that their colleagues think it is important to discuss issues of race and ethnicity in the classroom.
- + Fewer than half of respondents (44%) agree/strongly agree that their principals support teachers engaging in conversations about race and ethnicity.
- + Fewer than half of respondents (43%) feel prepared to discuss instances of violence against undocumented immigrants with their students (ie. deportation, hate crimes, elimination of DACA).
- + Fewer than half of respondents (45%) say they definitely feel prepared to intervene if/when they witness tensions between students based on their identities (race, language, sexual or gender identity, etc), and only 7% feel that their colleagues are definitely prepared to respond to those types of tensions.

### Samples of Teachers' Comments

"I believe it is important to discuss issues of race and ethnicity in the classroom. but I have received little training about how to do so."

*-Manhattan middle school teacher*

"I would like to do this but have never received any support or training on how to modify the science lessons to connect with students' racial and ethnic backgrounds. I'm not even sure what that would look like and if it would be possible to do on a daily basis."

*-Manhattan middle school science teacher*

"I always try to include my student's culture and heritage but I do not always feel I have the best tools or am the best person to do so."

*-Bronx high school art teacher*

“I feel as though I have received some training and have potential access to some materials, however given the environment and social climate at my school, in combination with the powerful and sensitive nature of the topics, I do not feel fully equipped or ready to approach teaching these subjects explicitly in my classroom.”

*-Brooklyn middle school English Language Arts teacher*

“I feel unprepared professionally to teach my students about issues of race/ethnicity. I can however, discuss it with them through personal experience and from what I believe is right. My school does NOT address this at all, for some reason.”

*-Brooklyn high school teacher*

“The primary obstacle to addressing race well in the classroom is lacking time/expertise - it can't be done half-way, and shouldn't be done poorly. It often is in pre-prepared curriculum and there is little time to make your own.”

*-Manhattan middle school teacher*

“Push back from school and DOE administration is one of the biggest obstacles to open dialogue.”

*-Queens high school teacher*

“I try to incorporate racial/class/culture and social justice issues into my teaching using my own knowledge and research, but this is not supported by my principal or district and has been at times discouraged by other teachers and my administration.”

*-Queens elementary school science teacher*

“I want my students to acquire the skills to critically understand issues related to race and ethnicity, but am not sure how to develop these in an authentic context while teaching math.”

*-Manhattan high school math teacher*

“I'm part of a group of teachers at my school that's working to create spaces for teachers to discuss race and culturally responsive teaching. I do modify my lessons when possible but still struggle with how best to do so, especially when also preparing students for the Regents.”

*-Brooklyn high school English teacher*

## Finding 3:

### NYC Teachers Want Support on How To Engage Topics of Race, Ethnicity and Other Identities in the Classroom

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- + Respondents primarily rely on the internet (25%) and fellow teachers (25%) for guidance about discussing race and ethnicity in their classroom. Only 10% rely on NYC Department of Education professional development for this information.
- + Respondents feel that professional development and training on how to integrate topics of race and ethnicity into their subject area (78%), resource materials (69%), discussions with colleagues (66%) and encouragement from school leaders (52%) would help them teach students to think critically about issues of race and ethnicity.

### Samples of Teachers' Comments

"I am extremely open to hearing any way that my students can have increased access/connections to my curriculum including the ways in which representation/seeing oneself in curriculum impacts access."

*-Brooklyn middle school English Language Arts teacher*

"I would love to learn how to create lessons that take into account my students racial and ethnic backgrounds and experiences."

*-Bronx elementary school teacher*

"As an English teacher, our department has been moving to diversify the curriculum, but I think it goes beyond that and would like to know more about how to make it more than just 'reading books by people of color'."

*-Manhattan high school English teacher*

"No one's lessons are perfect and I'm always open to modification especially if it means making my science classes more relatable and meaningful to my students' backgrounds."

*-Bronx high school science teacher*

"I teach Earth Science, too vast a curriculum already. If someone unpacked it to a racially integrated model, I'd use it but I don't even know where to start on this angle."

*-Brooklyn high school science teacher*

"As a white woman I don't feel equipped to talk about [race and ethnicity], but want to. I would love to learn how to do a better job of teaching it and discussing it so I can help my students and create a better world for the future generations."

*-Manhattan middle school English Language Arts teacher*

“I am always open to feedback on my lessons, especially with regards to how to discuss race and ethnicity in the classroom. However, I think this is best taught through a coaching model where we are prepared, observed and given feedback in the real classroom setting.”

-Bronx middle school teacher

“I try to frame lessons keeping students’ racial and ethnic backgrounds in mind, but it is a work in progress which needs constant thought, attention and modification.”

-Brooklyn elementary school teacher

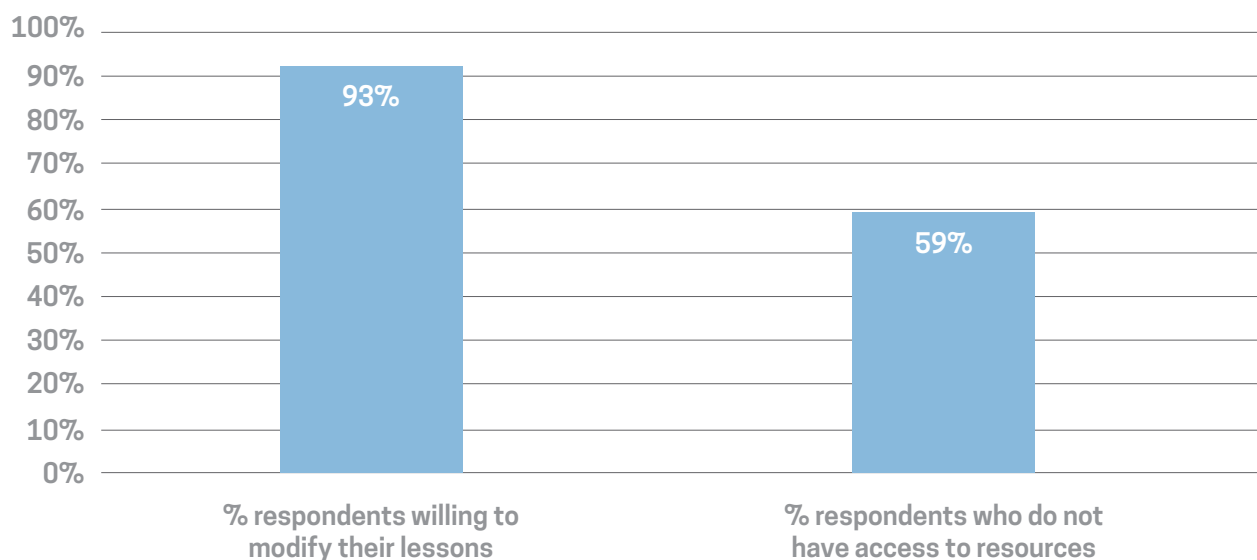
“As a science teacher I would love support on how to incorporate race and ethnic backgrounds into my science curriculum.”

-Brooklyn middle school science teacher

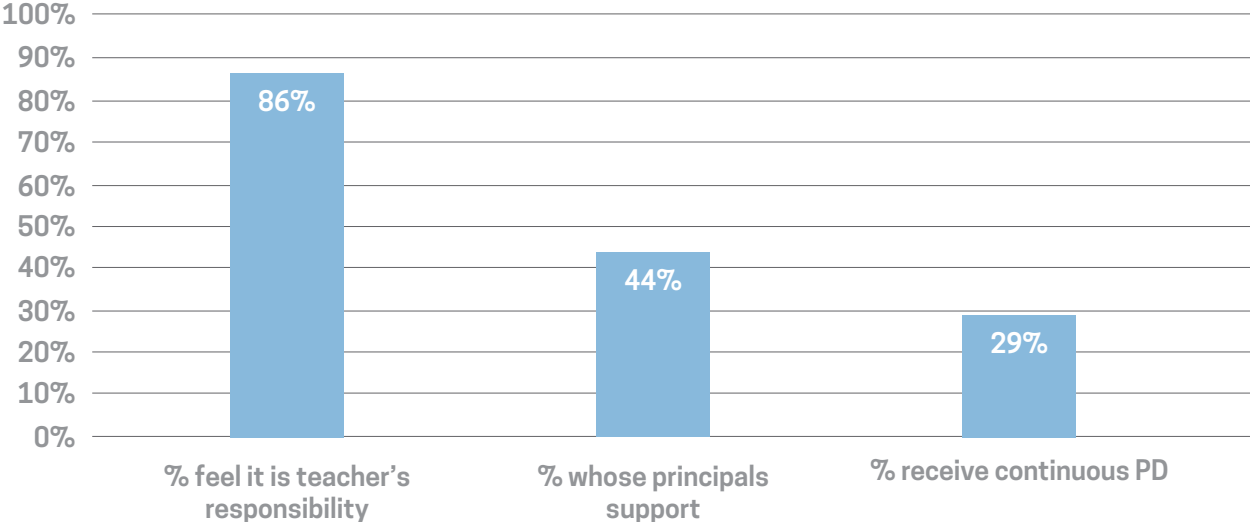
## Figures

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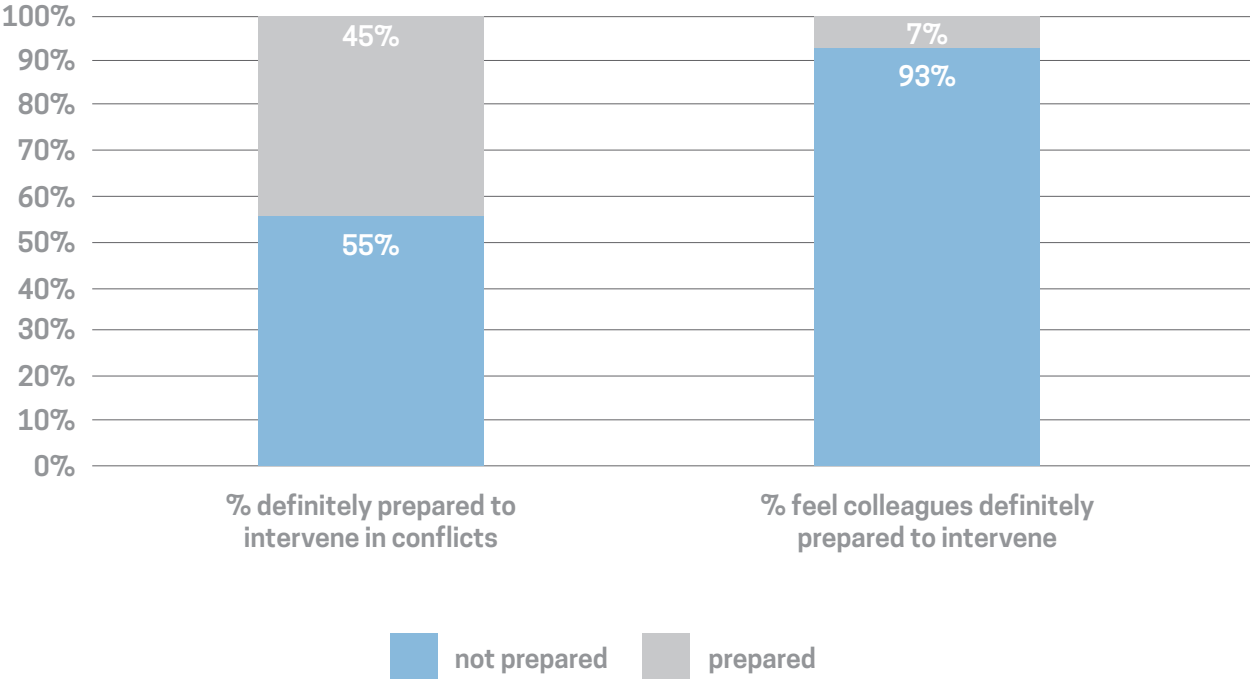
### Teachers Are Willing to Modify Lessons But Don't Have Resources To Do So



# Teachers Feel Responsibility to Engage Race & Ethnicity But Don't Have Support To Do So



# Teachers Not Fully Prepared to Respond to Tensions Related to Race/Ethnicity





## Conclusion

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These survey results strongly suggest that, in the NYC public school system where 83% of the students are people of color, but less than 40% of the teachers are, many teachers want and need support to address topics of race, ethnicity and other identities in their classrooms and in their curriculum. While many teachers are receptive to approaching these issues and changing their practices, they are left on their own to seek guidance from peers or independent resource materials, and left on their own to make mistakes. In a system where many teachers are already balancing lesson planning, curriculum development, social-emotional and crisis support for students, classroom management and other demands, this ad-hoc approach is not sufficient. Teachers can only engage effectively engage students around topics related to race, ethnicity and other identities if they have adequate training and support.

The recent spate of news reports of racially biased incidents in NYC schools has highlighted some of the destructive schooling attitudes and practices related to race.<sup>5</sup> While these offenses may not be typical, neither are they likely limited to the schools that make the news. Without an intentional, ambitious, comprehensive and systemic effort to increase cultural competence among NYC educators, these degrading incidents will continue to occur, further alienating students of color from their schools and their learning.

The City's administration must take responsibility for ensuring that all teachers are culturally competent. Just as we should not allow a teacher with no math training to teach Algebra, we should not allow teachers without preparation and training in racial and cultural competency to teach diverse student populations. These cultural competencies cannot be developed through an online webinar, or a one-time training; developing such competencies requires regular, ongoing, and long-term interventions that are integrated into teachers' and schools' routines. The good news is that many NYC teachers, of all races and backgrounds, are eager to get started.

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<sup>1</sup> We circulated the survey through social media platforms and teacher networks, as well as through several specific DOE instructional initiatives and through non-profit school improvement organizations that partner with teachers. Of the respondents, 53% were white, 23% African-American, 19% Latinx, 9% Asian and 2% indigenous (some people identify as more than one race). The schools they teach in also roughly mirror NYC public schools: about three-quarters of respondents reported that the majority of their students are Black and Latino and that more than 75% of them are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch. The respondents represent a range of grade levels: 28% teach in elementary schools, 41% in middle schools, and 29% in high schools. They represent a wide range of subject areas, with a predominance in English Language Arts (36%).

<sup>2</sup> Milner, R (2017) Race, talk, opportunity gaps, and curriculum shifts in (teacher) education. Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2381336917718804>

<sup>3</sup> Education Week Research Center (2017) *controversial current events* [Survey Instrument]. Retrieved from email communication

<sup>4</sup> There is extensive research on this topic, including:

Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*, 2nd Edition. San Francisco: Wiley Publishers.

Nieto, S. (2002). *Language, culture, and teaching: Critical perspectives for a new century*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Murphy, M.C., Steele, C.M., & Gross, J.J. (2007). Signaling threat: How situational cues affect women in math, science, and engineering settings. *Psychological Science*, 18(10), 879-885. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01995.x

Schmader, T., & Johns, M. (2003). Converging evidence that stereotype threat reduces working memory capacity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 440-452.

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Carter, P. & Darling-Hammond, L. (2016). *Teaching diverse learners*. In Drew H. Gitomer and Courtney Bell (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, 5th Edition (pp. 593-638).

Boaler, J. (2002). Learning from teaching: Exploring the relationship between reform curriculum and equity. *Journal for research in mathematics education*, 239-258.

Lee, C. D., & Erickson, F. (2017). Integrating Research on How People Learn and Learning Across Settings as a Window of Opportunity to Address Inequality in Educational Processes and Outcomes. *Review of research in education*, 88.

<sup>5</sup> Burke, K (2018, February 1). Bronx teacher sparks outrage for using black students in cruel slavery lesson. *NY Daily News*. Retrieved from <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/bronx-teacher-sparks-outrage-cruel-slavery-lesson-article-1.3793930>;

Chapman, B (2018, February 1). *Principal ignites protests for allegedly prohibiting teacher from black history lessons at Bronx school*. *NY Daily News*. Retrieved from [www.nydailynews.com/new-york/racist-principal-bars-black-history-lessons-bronx-school-article-1.3812943](http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/racist-principal-bars-black-history-lessons-bronx-school-article-1.3812943);

**Carrega, C** (2018, February 8). Queens school rejects student's bid to add his name Malcolm X on senior sweater, then mocks him. *NY Daily News*. Retrieved from [www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/queens-student-malcolm-x-senior-sweater-article-1.3806658](http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/queens-student-malcolm-x-senior-sweater-article-1.3806658);

Chapman, B (2018, February 12). Blackface photos used in Brooklyn PTA fund-raiser message ignite outrage. *NY Daily News*. Retrieved from [www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/blackface-photos-pta-fund-raiser-message-ignite-outrage-article-1.3814759](http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/blackface-photos-pta-fund-raiser-message-ignite-outrage-article-1.3814759)