

Becoming Anti-Racist ELA Teachers



**“The opposite of racist isn’t ‘not racist.’
It is ‘anti-racist’”**

- Ibram X. Kendi, author of *How to Be an Antiracist*

With a rising global movement to end racial injustice, the need to affirm, celebrate and advocate for Black students in our classrooms has become even more important. Teaching for an anti-racist future starts with educators, whether they come from a school that has a predominately White population or one that is diverse, including Black and other historically marginalized populations.

The work to become anti-racist is difficult and ongoing, but is necessary for all teachers and all students, and will look different for people of different racial groups. But how can middle and high school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers work towards becoming anti-racist educators? We, as former English teachers and current ELA teacher educators, have developed five steps, based on the work of scholars, teachers and activists, for actively moving towards anti-racist ELA education.

“Positioning for learning to be an anti-racist teacher requires awareness of who you are in relation to your world and an acknowledgement that we all have biases, which is the first step toward dismantling them.”

Step One: Listen and Reflect

Anti-racism is the commitment to fight racism wherever it is found, including within yourself. Therefore, the journey to becoming anti-racist begins at the personal level. Remember, the goal is not about pretending to be free of racism, but working to become anti-racist.

> Positioning

- Educators often encourage their students to take the stance of a learner, but this positioning is also required in learning to be an anti-racist teacher. White educators must learn how to deal with “White emotionalities” and “White fragility.”
- To begin this process, it is helpful to consider the types of interactions you had with people who were different from you when growing up, if you have ever harbored prejudiced thoughts towards those from different backgrounds and what effects those thoughts have on students who come from different backgrounds.

> Listening

- To become anti-racist, listen to what Black children, families and teachers voluntarily share about their experiences as their lived truths, even when the stories they share make you uncomfortable.
- Although there is often a desire to respond to these truths and uncomfortable moments by focusing on intention, taking the stance of a learner allows educators to stay open and engaged.

> Reflecting

- Students’, families’ and colleagues’ truths should serve as encouragement to critically reflect on how racism is perpetuated and how to fight it in schools.
- Beyond just acknowledging the hurt or sympathizing, anti-racist teachers take risks for and work alongside Black students, families and colleagues.



Step Two: Read

Educators, particularly ELA teachers, understand the importance of reading as a learning tool. There are **a variety of books** available to help address anti-racism and anti-bias in English Language Arts classrooms. Reading through these texts, educators might consider what the book says, what the meaning and implications of that message are for their practice, and what they as teachers can do to address similar or related issues in their own classrooms.

- > **Books Focused on Culturally/Historically Responsive Frameworks and Methods**
 - These books ask teachers to think about teaching through a social justice lens, using culturally and historically relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies, and critical action frameworks and methods.
- > **Books Focused on Conversations and Discussion Approaches**
 - These books provide teachers with strategies for creating a dialogic environment for engaging in critical discussions about race and other identities, along with critical examination of teachers' own interactions with students.
- > **Books about Writing and Language Study**
 - These books question standardized English and ask teachers to take a culturally responsive, decolonized approach to language and writing instruction by celebrating and incorporating variation and students' funds of knowledge.
- > **Books for Literature Study**
 - These books offer critical perspectives of the literary canon and beloved authors and texts, and ask teachers to expand the choices of multicultural and diverse literature in classrooms.
- > **Books Focused on Intersections of Gender, Race and Literacy**
 - These books specifically offer strategies for engaging Black girls and boys in literacy practices, unpacking why Black and other marginalized students might struggle in traditional literacy settings and what educators can do to facilitate their successes.
- > **White, Anti-racist Educator Narratives**
 - These books discuss White educators' stories of becoming anti-racist ELA teachers, offering glimpses into their schools and classrooms and conversations with students.



Step Three: Interrogate

Interrogation requires deep, ongoing critical questioning and educators who unpack their current practices should know that it will not be easy work. Interrogation may lead educators to uncover hidden biases they didn't realize they had.

- > **Interrogating Curriculum and Instruction**
 - Examine all curriculum materials and question how inclusive their course or department curriculum have been. Consider what the curriculum contains and the messages it sends, both explicitly and implicitly.
 - Seek to humanize students and think critically about how a curriculum could inflict violence on students, intentionally or unintentionally. Examples of curriculum violence include activities in which students participate in reenactments of slavery, having students write from the perspective of an enslaver, or leaving a particular groups' history out of the curriculum entirely.
- > **Interrogating Texts**
 - Consider the student population and ensure that books included in the curriculum allow all students to see themselves reflected. Don't hold onto problematic texts— like *Huckleberry Finn* or *To Kill a Mockingbird*— just because they are in the literary canon.

“Anti-racist curriculum and instruction must be empowering and equity-oriented while also critical of established norms, such as the literary canon, that propagate anti-blackness.”

- Consider the authors of the texts and how many books used in the classroom are “own voices” stories that are written or illustrated by Black and other non-white authors and illustrators. Remove selections that were written by authors with racist views, White authors trying to write about other races’ experiences and that contain harmful stereotypes.
 - Consider the amount of time spent on books that highlight a wide variety of cultures and races. Anti-racist educators will privilege diverse texts year-round, not just during “multicultural” units.
- **Interrogating Approaches to Text Analysis**
- Apply a critical literacy lens to any approach to literature. Question who the text was written for, whose perspectives and narratives are omitted, what cultural meanings can be construed and what is the text trying to accomplish.
 - Examine what critical literacy makes possible and what gets left out by questioning how the analysis of texts are defined by particular discourse and how those discourses can be altered, interrupted and resisted.
 - Educators who want to disrupt texts must interrogate their biases to understand how they inform teaching practices, center the authentic voices and lived experiences of people of color, apply a critical literacy lens to teaching practices and work in community with other educators, particularly non-White educators.
- **Interrogating Approaches to Writing**
- Consider the kinds of writings that are privileged in the curriculum, thinking about what genres and Englishes are valued and whose ways with words are marginalized by the kinds of speaking and writing used in the classroom.
 - Be open to including diverse English varieties as legitimate content in ELA studies, equipping students with the knowledge of a variety of Englishes and the spaces to wield them.
 - Consider the range of ways people engage in writing and the power hierarchies embedded in written communication and work to make them transparent in classrooms. Support students in understanding ideologies around written communication and prepare them to write across various situations.



Step Four: Act

It's important that educators move from listening to action, turn reflection into change and allow their interrogation to inspire transformation. Language has power, and English teachers should be sensitive, intentional and reflective in language that can lead to action.

➤ **Acting Within School Culture**

- Share what you learn about anti-racist teaching with colleagues across the disciplines and invite them to read and plan together. Work with principals to find opportunities to make anti-racist professional development a consistent part of school culture.
- Examine school policies for who is allowed or offered honors, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate English courses and whether the school's tracking system has allowed for advancement of students of color.

➤ **Acting Within Standards**

- Incorporate social justice standards, related to identity, diversity, justice and action, into the curriculum and intentionally plan for ways to incorporate standards into all lessons.
- Use these standards to help students to recognize traits of their dominant culture and home culture, develop language and knowledge to accurately and respectfully describe people, recognize stereotypes and make principled decisions about how and when to take a stand against bias and injustice.

➤ **Acting with Students**

- Amplify the strengths, identities and voices of students through writing and activism. Help students, particularly those who have been historically marginalized, to share their stories and have their voices heard.
- Help center and publish student voices by implementing an inclusive writing curriculum, giving students a chance to edit their work through guided peer reviews or individual conferencing, sharing student work online or through the school library, celebrating their achievements and organizing events for students to share work beyond the classroom.

➤ **Acting with Texts**

- Add, replace or remove books in the curriculum that no longer suit the needs of the school community or can help students find windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors into other experiences, and celebrate Black joy, excellence, and the everyday, and not just trauma and violence.
- Move beyond mere inclusion of these texts. Educators should use texts to address and discuss inequities, unpack privilege and racism today, celebrate cultural knowledge and assets, and disrupt status quo and long-held norms and institutional practices that prevent or thwart equality for all.

➤ **Actions to Avoid**

- Anti-racist educators should not call on Black or other minoritized students to speak on behalf of all Black and other racialized people.
- Educators should avoid racially coded language— words like “thug,” “sketchy” or “ghetto” for example— that dehumanize Black people.
- Do not shortcut or sidestep the hard work of becoming anti-racist by using prepackaged, ready-made anti-racist materials.

Step Five: Repeat

The work an anti-racist educator needs to do is never done. Step Five reminds educators that when they think they are done, it is time to return to Step One, or whatever step is necessary to revisit. Anti-racist and anti-bias education is a life-long commitment and practice.

➔ For the full white paper, visit: ced.ncsu.edu/anti-racist-ela



Author Bios



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