

Implicit bias and concern about appearing racist predict teachers' reluctance to discuss race and racism in classrooms

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Across the U.S., K-12 public school teachers face significant psychological barriers to discussing issues of race and racism with their

students, according to new research by a University of Massachusetts social psychologist.

Linda Tropp, professor of psychological and brain sciences, examined how teachers' implicit [racial biases](#) and concerns about appearing racist may affect their intentions and confidence about engaging their [students](#) in race talk. The findings were recently published online by the journal *Social Psychology of Education*.

"This research was done to try to understand what can sometimes get in the way of teachers' best intentions to want to talk about race with their students," says Tropp, who has extensive experience working in schools and seeking to support teachers in engaging students in conversations about race and other important and [sensitive topics](#). "How do we equip teachers to engage in these conversations? What we're hoping is that findings from this research can be used to inform future professional development programs for teachers, so that they feel more prepared to 'go there' with their students."

Analyzing data from two large surveys, each including responses from more than 1,000 K-12 teachers, Tropp found that teachers' implicit racial biases and their explicit fears of being perceived as racist both independently contributed to lower intentions to talk about race with their students. These psychological barriers are still evident, even after Tropp took into account numerous other variables such as teachers' years of experience, their demographic characteristics, characteristics of the schools in which they teach and their own prior exposure to diversity training.

Recent teacher training and professional development programs have typically focused on educating teachers about implicit racial biases—that is, unconscious racial biases they may have and about which they may have limited awareness—without sufficiently addressing teachers'

conscious concerns about how they may be seen, or how their comments may be interpreted, Tropp explains.

"This is not just something unique to teachers, but something that we all experience in our society, where people are very quick to judge what we say," Tropp says. "It's understandable that we would have concerns about how what we say might be perceived or received by others."

Tropp emphasizes that future training efforts need to consider how both implicit racial biases and conscious concerns about being seen as racist may curb teachers' willingness to engage students in meaningful and productive conversations around race. Tropp's paper states, "As we examine potential barriers to teachers' engagement in race talk with students, we must also learn how to support teachers effectively when they are called upon to facilitate these discussions."

In light of current political and social debates about race-related topics in school curricula, Tropp says it is increasingly urgent for teachers to discuss race in the [classroom](#) to help students process what they see and hear outside of the classroom. She notes, "By providing students with opportunities to engage in meaningful discussions about race, [teachers](#) can prepare them for respectful exchanges of perspectives with others and full participation as engaged citizens in an increasingly multifaceted and diverse society."

More information: Linda R. Tropp and Christina L. Rucinski, How implicit racial bias and concern about appearing racist shape K-12 teachers' race talk with students, *Social Psychology of Education* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s11218-022-09715-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-022-09715-5)

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