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Leading Difficult Conversations About Racism, Inclusion and Wellbeing in Australian Schools

A Practical Guide for Educational Leaders
and Teams

About This Guide

Schools and educational organisations regularly navigate complex conversations involving identity, racism, discrimination, wellbeing, equity, culture, behaviour, community expectations and organisational change.

Many educators want to support safe and inclusive school environments but may feel uncertain about how to navigate conversations involving race, racism and discrimination.

Developing racial literacy can help educators and leaders respond more thoughtfully, safely and effectively when harm or exclusion occurs within school communities.

Difficult conversations can feel uncomfortable, emotionally charged or uncertain. However, avoiding these conversations can often increase misunderstanding, tension and harm.

This guide provides practical reflection prompts and strategies to support leaders and teams in approaching difficult conversations with care, clarity and respect.

Why Difficult Conversations Matter

Healthy organisational cultures are not built through avoiding challenge. They are strengthened when people:

- Feel psychologically safe
- Can raise concerns without fear
- Are willing to listen and reflect
- Engage with complexity constructively
- Take accountability when needed

Difficult conversations can support:

- Stronger relationships
- Greater trust
- Improved well-being
- Better decision-making
- More inclusive and culturally safe school environments
- Earlier and more timely responses to harm and exclusion

Before the Conversation

Reflect First

Before initiating a difficult conversation, it is important to first pause and reflect.

Some reflection questions to consider include:

- *What is the purpose of this conversation?*
- *What outcome am I hoping for?*
- *What assumptions may I be bringing?*
- *What emotions am I experiencing?*
- *What emotions may the other person be experiencing?*
- *Is this the right time and setting?*
- *What support may be needed?*



Creating Conditions for Safety

Psychological safety is essential for meaningful dialogue.

People are more likely to engage openly when they feel:

- Respected
- Believed and listened to
- Not immediately judged
- Emotionally safe to share painful experiences
- Able to express uncertainty or vulnerability

Consider:

- Privacy and confidentiality
- Tone and body language
- Power dynamics
- Timing
- Emotional readiness
- Cultural considerations

During the Conversation

1. Lead With Curiosity

Approach the conversation with openness rather than certainty.

Below are questions to consider asking in building understanding:

- *“Can you help me understand your perspective?”*
- *“I’d like to hear more about your experience.”*
- *“Can we explore this together?”*

2. Listen to Understand

Active listening builds trust and reduces defensiveness.

Some strategies to consider include:

- Avoid interrupting
- Reflect back the key points
- Clarify rather than assume
- Acknowledge emotions where appropriate
- Allow pauses and silence

Below is some helpful language for respectful dialogue:

- *“What I’m hearing is...”*
- *“That sounds important.”*
- *“Thank you for sharing that.”*



3. Stay Grounded in Shared Values

When conversations become difficult, returning to shared values can help to maintain focus.

Examples include:

- Student well-being
- Respect
- Inclusion
- Emotional and cultural safety
- Learning
- Community care
- Human rights and dignity

Reflection Prompt

- *What values do we want to uphold in this conversation?*

4. Avoid Defensiveness

Defensiveness can shut down dialogue and increase tension.

Some signs of defensiveness are:

- Explaining before listening
- Minimising concerns
- Redirecting blame
- Interrupting
- Focusing only on intent rather than impact

Instead

- Pause before responding
- Stay curious
- Acknowledge impact
- Be willing to reflect and learn

5. Make Space for Discomfort

Not all difficult conversations will feel resolved immediately.

Discomfort does not necessarily mean the conversation has failed.

Growth, accountability and change often involve uncertainty and emotional complexity.

Navigating Challenging Moments

Conversations involving racism, discrimination, identity or harm can sometimes evoke strong emotional responses. This may include discomfort, frustration, defensiveness, sadness, anger or withdrawal.

Strong emotions do not necessarily mean the conversation should end. However, leaders and educators have a responsibility to maintain emotional safety and respond thoughtfully.

Consider:

- Slowing the conversation down
- Acknowledging emotion respectfully
- Taking a pause if needed
- Returning to shared purpose and values
- Focusing on respectful communication
- Avoiding reactive or defensive responses
- Checking in on the well-being of impacted individuals
- Creating opportunities for follow-up reflection or support

Here is a helpful reflection prompt:

- *What support or conditions may help people continue engaging safely and constructively?*

If Racism or Harm Has Occurred

Where possible:

- Listen without becoming defensive
- Acknowledge the impact of the behaviour or incident
- Support the well-being and safety of impacted students or staff
- Take responsibility where appropriate
- Consider what accountability and repair may look like
- Reflect on what organisational learning or action may be needed
- Avoid minimising or dismissing experiences of racism or discrimination

Remember that an agreement is not always reached.

Not all conversations end in full agreement; however, respectful engagement can still strengthen understanding, relationships and future dialogue.

Here are some reflection questions for leaders to guide reflection and dialogue:

- *What kinds of conversations are easiest for our organisation?*
- *Which conversations tend to be avoided?*
- *What supports psychological safety within our teams?*
- *How do power dynamics influence participation?*
- *How do we respond when concerns are raised?*
- *What modelling do leaders provide during challenging moments?*

Team Discussion Activity

Ongoing reflection is part of the journey. Use the following prompts during leadership meetings or professional learning:

- 1. What makes difficult conversations challenging within educational settings?*
- 2. What conditions help people feel safe speaking openly?*
- 3. How do we respond when discomfort emerges?*
- 4. What behaviours strengthen trust during difficult conversations?*
- 5. What practical improvements could strengthen communication within our organisation?*

Here are some practical conversation reminders:

- Listen to understand, not only to respond
- Stay curious and reduce defensiveness
- Focus on the impact of the harm caused
- Allow space for reflection
- Avoid rushing to a resolution
- Return to shared values
- Maintain accountability
- Recognise the humanity of everyone involved

Closing Reflection

Difficult conversations are part of meaningful educational practice.

When approached with care, reflection and accountability, these conversations can strengthen trust, relationships and organisational culture.

The goal is not perfection.

The goal is creating environments where people can engage honestly, respectfully and constructively.

Prepared by Diversity Focus
www.diversityfocus.com.au