

The N-Word in PCSD Curriculum, Instructional Materials, and Classroom Instruction

Great care is given to the choice of instructional materials that support our curriculum and foster the growth of our students as critical thinkers, problem solvers, and compassionate human beings. Those materials at times may include challenging and sensitive topics, themes, or words. The N-word is perhaps the most challenging of those words. Given the historical and emotionally charged nature of this word, and the urgency around getting this work right, this document focuses specifically on the N-word, but it can serve as a template and guidance for dealing with any number of other challenging words and topics.

Understanding the History

Being aware of the history of the N-word is essential to being able to successfully and sensitively manage the use of it within a classroom instructional setting.

“The word is inextricably linked with violence and brutality on black psyches and derogatory aspersions cast on black bodies. No degree of appropriating can rid it of that blood-soaked history.”

Neal A. Lester, Dean of Humanities and former Chair of the English Department at Arizona State University.

Classroom Climate

The importance of establishing a strong, supportive, and respectful classroom culture where all students feel valued and safe is an inherent part of our work as educators. Even within the most respectful and supportive of classrooms, additional care needs to be taken and specific norm-setting for how the class will handle the use of the N-word must take place PRIOR to the introduction of these materials.

Listening patiently, listening actively, and thinking before speaking are all important norms for engaging in challenging conversations. Building in opportunities for students to process and reflect on what they are hearing, thinking, and feeling is also critical to the success of these discussions.

Why Not Eliminate Materials that Contain the N-Word from our Curriculum?

The N-word can be found in a variety of high quality instructional materials currently embedded in our curriculum including books such as *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*, *The Liberation of Gabriel King*, *Tom Sawyer*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men*, and others. The word also presents itself in plays, films, historical documents, and other materials in a variety of classrooms.

To eliminate all materials that make use of the N-word from our teaching would rob us of the opportunity to help our students develop the skills necessary to understand the historically destructive power and complexity behind this word and to “thoughtfully contribute to lifelong discussions about its appropriate use” (Kay 165). Rather than eliminating these materials and thereby avoiding the conversations, we need to find developmentally appropriate and sensitive ways to handle the N-word within our instructional spaces.

Things to Consider

No one should be able to give anyone else permission to use the word.

No one should be allowed to read the word aloud.

No one should be surprised about encountering the word; preparation should always come first.

No one should be forced to publically share their own experiences with the word.

Dos and Don'ts for Handling the N-Word in Curriculum, Instructional Materials, and Classroom Instruction

- **Do** understand that regardless of race status, no student or staff should read or say the N-word aloud in the classroom setting.
- **Do** talk with your students about how to handle the word when it appears in a text, including the identification of an acceptable substitute (i.e. "N-word") that all will use when reading the text aloud.
- **Do** take the time to establish norms for how to respond to seeing the N-word in the classroom materials.
- **Do** plan to lay the ground work through thoughtful, developmentally appropriate instruction.
- **Don't** ignore it.
- **Don't** expect any one member of an identity group to speak for all members of that group.
- **Do** treat all students as the individuals that they are.
- **Do** your own research on the historical and societal contexts that provide the power behind this word.
- **Don't** leave students with the impression that they have permission to use the N-word outside of the instructional setting.

Suggested Strategies

Your instructional approach to handling the N-word is highly dependent on the age of the students you are teaching. The list of ideas below is not meant to be exhaustive, nor is every strategy developmentally appropriate for all grade levels of students.

- Use picture books to introduce discussions of race, segregation, and the civil rights movement.
- Ask students to write about the N-word – what is their relationship to the word? What do they know about the word?
- De-construct the word by providing instruction around the context of the history of white supremacy, lynching, economic suppression as well as segregation and discrimination.
- Discuss the author's intent in using the word, but remember that author's intent isn't everything. "*Words are attached to images, right? For some people, the N-word is attached to images like lynching and slavery... people can't just detach the word from the images*" (M. Kay).

Resources

"Good Teachers Use the N-Word." *The Hechinger Report*, 21 Aug. 2018, www.hechingerreport.org/good-teachers-use-the-n-word/.

Kay, Matthew R. *Not Light, but Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom*. Stenhouse, 2018.

Kenney, Michelle. "Teaching the N-Word." *Rethinking Schools*, vol. 29, no. 1, Fall 2014, www.rethinkingschools.org/articles/teaching-the-n-word.

"NCTE Position Statement Regarding Rating or "Red Flagging" Books." *NCTE*, July 2018, www2.ncte.org/statement/rating-books/.

Price, Sean. "Straight Talk about the N-Word." *Teaching Tolerance*, issue 40, Fall 2011, www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2011/straight-talk-about-the-nword.

For additional information, ideas, and resources go to: <https://www.smore.com/w6dbc-extra-flyer>