



# DIMENSIONS OF DIFFERENCE AND SIMILARITY REFLECTION

*"Wholeheartedness calls on us to put down the armor and bring out the more shadowy parts of ourselves and our history—the parts we've always been scared to own, and that we spend a lot of time and energy ignoring—and fold them into ourselves, to create a complex, messy, awesome whole."*

— Brene Brown

## OVERVIEW

Teachers reflect on and discuss various dimensions of their identities to gain awareness of the impact of these on their relationships with students and their families.

## PLANNING FOR IT

### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- During a staff or grade-level team meeting
- For staff professional development
- For individual reflection

### TIME REQUIRED

- 60-90 minutes in an individual session
- Ideally, multiple sessions with different questions as focus areas

### LEVEL

- Adult

## MATERIALS

- Sonia Nieto quote: “Teachers bring their entire autobiographies with them: their experiences, identities, values, beliefs, attitudes, hang-ups, biases, wishes, dreams, and hopes. It is useless for them to deny this; the most they can do is acknowledge how these may either get in the way of, or enhance their work with students.” --from [What Keeps Teachers Going?](#)
- Chart paper for brainstorming
- Reflection questions (see below)

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Staff members will:

- Strengthen educator self-awareness and social awareness
- Use reflective practice to gain insight into how educators’ multiple identities may impact relationships with students, colleagues, and families

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Prior to leading this exercise with a group, take a moment to list various aspects of your identity and reflect on how these identities might impact your relationships with students, staff members, and parents.

### INSTRUCTIONS

### THE PRACTICE

- Begin by sharing the quote from Sonia Nieto:
  - “Teachers bring their entire autobiographies with them: their experiences, identities, values, beliefs, attitudes, hang-ups, biases, wishes, dreams, and hopes. It is useless for them to deny this; the most they can do is acknowledge how these may either get in the way of, or enhance their work with students.” -- from [What Keeps Teachers Going?](#)

- Keeping this quote in mind, brainstorm what may be some of the various dimensions of who we (educators) are that may be similar or different from each other and our students. Explain that these dimensions are a part of our identities and are carried with us in the classroom and throughout all school settings (examples: race, ethnicity, political views, socioeconomic, religion, urban, suburban, rural, hobbies, family structure, personality, differing abilities, sexual orientation, nationality, language, physical appearance, etc.).
- Reflect on, journal, and discuss the following questions (if possible, divide the questions between multiple sessions):
  - What might be some parts of your identity that affect how you are perceived by students, parents, or other school staff?
  - What might be some parts of your students' identities that affect how your students see themselves or each other, or how you see them?
  - How might some parts of your identity affect relationships between you and your students -- either positively or negatively?
  - How might the impact of these dimensions play out when teaching SEL skills to students or in the rest of your school day?

---

## CLOSURE

Continue to notice how various aspects of your identity impact your interactions with students. Journal about how your growing awareness may shift your relationship with students.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

How did people respond to this exercise? Did it deepen their awareness and understanding of themselves, their colleagues, and/or students and their families?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In a pilot [study](#), 44 predominantly white, American pre-service teachers engaged in critical reflection on texts, lectures, and workshops while examining their own histories on topics like family, schooling, ethnicity, and racial identity formation. After participating in this study, eighty percent of participants developed an anti-racist teacher identity (e.g., actively working to undo racism), and most teachers also showed significant changes in “their perceptions of what it means to be a teacher in a culturally diverse society.”

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

[Eighty percent](#) of the teaching workforce in the United States is white. And yet [fifty percent](#) of the student population are children of color. The impact of this mismatch can be seen in [discipline disparities](#) and lower [academic outcomes and behavior evaluations](#) for students of color when compared with white students.

All students deserve an excellent education, but because of societal ills such as racism, prejudice, and inequality, not all students have access to a quality education. However, teachers can help to undo these inequities, beginning with the relationships they form with their students. But they must be willing to look within.

Helping teachers--especially those from the dominant culture--to become aware of and understand how their own racial identity and implicit biases affect the quality of education their students receive is a crucial part of building a just and equitable society.