



Teaching for Racial Equity Action Guide #3

The Gifts of Listening

In [Teaching for Racial Equity](#), and in our [Action Guide #1](#), we proposed that starting on efforts toward equity involves reviewing our own experiences growing up and considering how they may play a role in how we relate to our students. In [Action Guide #2](#), we suggested that the next step is to share these accounts and reflections with colleagues and to listen to their stories, so that we may each examine our experiences through an equity lens. Sharing our stories is a powerful, and we believe necessary, step in developing our own racial literacy, so that we may best serve all our students—those whose backgrounds are like our own, and those whose are not. We need to remember, though, that sharing is not just telling our own stories, but listening to those of others. Often, it seems that the telling is easier than the listening. We agree with a phrase that Katy saw in the email signature of a dear friend: “The greatest gift we can give is to listen.” We also believe that listening is a gift that is simultaneously given and received: both the speaker and the listener are enriched by open, thoughtful dialogue. How, then, do we listen in ways that enhance the giving and the receiving?

We suggest starting by taking a cue from Deon Arnold, a student contributor to *Teaching for Racial Equity* (pp. 161-164). As a middle-schooler, Deon organized a conflict resolution group to provide workshops for teens. Deon’s workshops begin this way: “First we take deep breaths” (p. 163). In starting a conversation around equity or other matters, taking a few deep breaths can help you to remain centered and focused on what the other person is saying, on listening to *learn*. Many people are socialized to view the key purpose of conversation as being to show that they are “right,” and to listen only enough to figure out what to say next. The purpose of sharing stories around our experiences with equity/inequity is to *learn* and *seek understanding*, not to be “right” or make a particular point.

Here are some ideas to help you give and receive the gifts that come from active listening:

- As a listener, stay silent while your partner speaks. This can be difficult—but it is essential!
- Pay attention to your body language, keeping your posture as open and relaxed as you can, while signaling your attentiveness through eye contact (not staring) and leaning in a little.
- Signal your encouragement by nodding or saying, “Mm hmm.”
- If it appears that your partner has completed a thought, consider reflecting back what they have said. This confirms that you’ve heard and understood them and provides a chance for them to clarify their thinking.
- If you want to ask a question, be mindful of your timing, your framing, and your intonation. Don’t interject just to ask something; frame your question as open-ended rather than in “yes-no” format; stay neutral rather than judgmental.

Keeping in mind that the goal here is to develop relationships and build community in ways that will make our classrooms, our schools, and the world more equitable places to be, listening in ways that acknowledge another’s humanity is incredibly important. This does not, however, mean that we should accept everything we hear. What if your partner says something that calls for critical analysis—for interruption, if not outright disruption?

That is a topic for a future Action Guide. Stay tuned!

We hope to hear from you and learn from your ideas and experiences at teaching4racialequity@gmail.com, or in our [Facebook Group](#)!

--Tonya, Steve, and Katy