Expanding “The Talk” from home to classroom- Engaging students in identifying unique aspects of their family talks and common themes

As various diverse young persons are targeted for biased treatment including acts of violence by peers, adults and those sworn to defend all citizens, many families are explicitly having crucial “talks” with their children to prepare them for targeting because of: race, religion, mixed/blended cultures, and news about race unrelated to them which will be projected upon them nonetheless. These talks also involve the caring and fearful parents providing their young children with a protocol of how to behave or act in the case of being verbally or physically targeted. Family members often literally rehearse appropriate actions including tone of voice, eye contact, slow movements, calm and other responses step by step with their young members. Sometimes these talks are literally planned at home or are modeled on the spot due to the adult family members themselves falling victim to the very racial/ethnic driven threats they fear will touch the lives of their children. For example being stopped and searched for a shoplifting crime, being stopped while driving for an alleged driving violation, being asked for ID at an event where a ticket has long ago been purchased and is in hand. These “the talk” family rituals are being done or modeled for students at earlier ages than previously, because of increasing awareness of how real threats are against a growing spectrum of proud diverse students who need to know how to navigate racism in its infinite hurtful, violent and even potentially deadly forms. But in addition to these “the talk” home discussions prepping students for the negatives and dangers of being who they are , the talks usually also have an additional layer of inculcating pride in their racial identity. Family members share to help the students be ongoing legacy carrying forward bearers, the key cultural values, artistic, language, purpose and community that have allowed their ethnic/ racial group to move forward lighting the world for all. These values are meant to not only strengthen the young persons in their response to actions of racist behavior but also to empower and to inspire them to identify as proactive members of their race with a mission to inform the world about their uniqueness and value.

While these “the talk” conversations and modeling are held at home, why not in this day of culturally responsive education and anti-racism, have the students who wish to share the ideas and the modeling of practices plus the cultural virtues, accomplishments and mission, communicated to them at home with their peers- also diverse, who are also listening to these talks? Through this sharing let them identify those elements of “The Talk” which are common despite the diversity of backgrounds and speakers and those which are unique.

But how to begin with a topic, however necessary for classroom discussion and life living, which is also so “family, so personal?

1. Start by talking about aspects of “The talk” from your own family life or use an excerpt or a digital testimony from one of the many authors in a growing field of “The Talk” books including: Ta-Nehisi Coates –Between the World and Me (2015), Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi –Stamped (For Kids) –Racism, Anti-racism and you-(2021), Tiffany Jewell –This Book is Anti-Racist (2020) or The Talk- Conversations about Race, Love & Truth-Wade Hudson & Cheryl Willis Hudson-a contemporary collection of diverse artists and illustrators creating original works about “The Talk.”
2. After you share your own “The Talk” experiences or an excerpt from any of the works suggested, or a digital commentary by one of the authors, ask the students to first explain in their own words what is being stated in this “talk” of dealing with racism and also what specific racial or cultural traits and strengths are also being celebrated.
3. Then ask the students whether they agree or disagree with the ideas and the usefulness of the suggestions made in the talk by the author or adult. Have them explain why they are in agreement or in disagreement with the author or the adult who shared these ideas. Encourage them to base their responses on personal life experiences or on experiences and ideas their family or network of adults have shared with them. Listen and encourage the students to react to peers, but do not put in your perspective.
4. Next, tell the students that while so far you have shared “The Talk” from outside authors and adults, it would be wonderful if some of them are willing to share “The Talk” their own family members have already given them. Ask by a show of hands who has had this conversation at home or been present for an incident where it emerged. Turn your back away from the class and let them see who among their peers has had the conversation. Also ask who also had been frequently told about the virtues, strengths, attributes and physical beauty of their race. Again just let them answer by a show of hands as you turn away.
5. Next post the following prompts:

What did your adult or older sibling family members tell you about the dangers or potential negative comments, you might encounter?

How did you react to their comments?

What questions did you ask?

What fears or experiences connected with your racial ID did you share with them?

What did they advise you to do?

Will you in the future follow through on their suggestions? Explain why yes or why not?

Did their talk make you more fearful or more confident? Explain.

What have you been told by your adult family members which enhanced your knowledge of your culture and your pride in being who you are? Share details of what your family wants to pass forward to you and what they hope you will carry forward.

1. Given these prompts, invite classroom volunteers to come forward to share the ideas and context of their talk and/or an incident or a personal experience which resulted in “The talk” or modeling a protocol of responses to racism. Whatever the number of students who volunteer, ask that students who are artists sketch when they share their experiences and the other students take notes. Encourage the student audience for the volunteers to ask questions about the students’ Talk presentations and to make comments about the ways in which the ideas expressed resonated or mirrored ideas from their family experiences.

This class discussion can be followed up by having the students go home and ask their families or adults about whether they were young, their families had “the Talk” with them or about the values or ideas they feel their children need to carry forward into their current lives as persons. Students can also ask if a recent or past experience in life underscored for their family member what it means to be a proud affirming culture participant. Students can share that experience and import any photos or emblems or objects that can go into that experience as well.

Students who choose not to get personal with their family, can explore and react to at least 5-7 quotes from the Jason Reynolds/Ibram X. Kendi Stamped or the Ta-Nihisi Coates Between the World and Me book. They can explain the quotes and share how they personally agree or disagree with them based on their own life experiences.

Schools are being asked, encouraged and begged to be culturally responsive to students. What is more culturally responsive, than having our increasing diverse, multi-racial and multi-lingual students analyze published and discussed “The Talk” growing genre books? How better to get students often individually racially harassed, misunderstood, attacked and in danger because of who they are , to realize that racism is not only against their culture or mixed culture per se, but is broadly targeted against the same spectrum of peers of other races and blends? How better as they listen to “The Talk” at home shared by loving family, is it for them to hear at school that peers of other races and blends also are hearing “The Talk”? As they begin to listen to one another, these young active student learners and thinkers can become as Jason Reynolds envisions in Stamped: “. . .players on the field, on the court, in our classrooms and communities, trying to do right. Because it takes a whole hand-both hands-to grab hold of hatred.” Bringing “The Talk” into the classroom, allows family ideas (are parents not partners in education) to join the classroom and bring comprehension and compassion into a powerful hold on racism and hatred.

Digital Resources:

Author Ta-Nehisi Coates on Banned Books Weeks, anti-racist books being banned-

<https://youtu.be/CCku9AcUYmA>

Jason Reynolds: Honesty, Joy, and Anti-Racism

<https://youtu.be/GfmdmFYOyfc>

Stamped Quotes by Jason Reynolds

<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/73010857-stamped>

Ta-Nehisi Coates -Between the World and Me <https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1214964.Ta_Nehisi_Coates>