



EDUCATION

When outside world gets chaotic, discussions pop up in classrooms

By Ty Tagami

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After her family watched the news coverage of people scaling the walls of the U.S. Capitol earlier this month, Charis Granger-Mbugua's son had a pressing question.

“Can they climb into our house, mommy?”

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Many children have experienced similar anxiety during a school year marked by social justice protests, violence in the streets and a divisive election that led to the ransacking of the halls of Congress.

A former teacher, Granger-Mbugua felt equipped to give her 6-year-old a lesson in civics. She was surprised and disappointed, though, when his classroom in Powder Springs, which she monitors online, didn't broach the subject. She is confident she would have been allowed to in her old classroom in Maryland, and a friend of hers with a young child there said the Capitol riot was addressed in school.

"So I'm wondering if it's a Southern thing," said Granger-Mbugua, who moved to Georgia a few years ago. "I don't know if it's just different here."



Credit: Curtis Compton / Curtis.Compton@

011921 Powder Springs: Former teacher Charis Granger-Mbugua works with her children Micah, 6, and Naomi, 4, on their school assignments at the family home on Tuesday, Jan. 19, 2021, in Powder Springs. Curtis Compton / Curtis.Compton@ajc.com”

While some Atlanta area schools have kept the political upheaval at arm's-length, others have addressed the tumultuous year head-on. And the momentous events are still unfolding, with the ongoing impeachment process of former President Donald Trump and last week's inauguration of incoming President Joe Biden.



By Kaiser Permanente

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Summer weather is here. You need to know the signs of heat exhaustion.

With widespread access to the internet, social media and television, children know big things are happening, even if they don't quite understand them.

And they are asking questions.

“Hey Ms. Clark, did you hear what happened yesterday?” That is how Atlanta teacher Shamandi Clark remembers each of her seventh-grade language arts classes starting on the day after the Capitol riot. “It was a bunch of why is the world doing this and a bunch of what does this mean for the future as we move to a next president,” she said.

Like many adults that day, Clark had more questions than answers herself. She bought time by talking instead about the trustworthiness of social media versus traditional news outlets and academic journals, and the need to analyze sources for bias.

Kimberly White-Smith, dean of the education college at the University of La Verne in California, said no student is too young for a lesson about contemporary politics.

Children see what's happening and must be taught about the facts and must be equipped with skills to interpret and cope with them, said White-Smith, who is on the board of directors of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education.

Teachers should assess their classroom's maturity level and circumstances when designing a lesson plan about a controversial subject, she said. Sometimes an open discussion might be unwise. There are alternatives, including writing poems, doing research into the topic and writing a report or pairing off and taking notes while a classmate reflects on an event, she said.

(PBS has created a lesson plan based on the poem "The Hill We Climb" recited by Amanda Gorman at Biden's inauguration. Her words alluded to the divisiveness that had inspired a riot at the same spot just a couple of weeks earlier.)

But conversations about politics, especially when they involve the country's history with race, aren't always welcome.

Some don't want these topics in the classroom at all. "I would wish for schools not to touch politics with a ten-foot-pole," one parent wrote in an email to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "I will teach my children."



The Cobb County School District, where Granger-Mbugua's son attends first grade and where she said the Capitol riot went unaddressed, explained the district's approach.

"No matter the news of the day, our teachers remain committed to helping students succeed, using Georgia Standards as their foundation for teaching across all school levels," a district spokesperson wrote in an email.

Samad Hakani, a junior at the Gwinnett School of Mathematics, Science, and Technology, said the teacher in his guidance period brought up the Capitol riot first thing the next morning.

"If we can't expect adults to act in a civil manner, how can we expect children to," Hakani, 16, remembers the teacher saying. Later that day, his AP history teacher brought it up again: "Well yesterday happened, let's talk about it."

They talked about it for the rest of the period, as they had done previously in a discussion about the election.

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He said he didn't think he would have been ready for the topic until late in middle school. "I think elementary school is probably a bit too young," he said.

But students in any grade can discuss these things when presented in an age-appropriate way, said Bronwyn Ragan-Martin, the superintendent of Early County and president of the

It can provoke anxiety among school leaders, though, since they must trust that their teachers know how to present the material without injecting their own opinions. “It is difficult when people are arguing over what is factual and what is not,” she said.

In DeKalb County, Laura Byrd Sanio eavesdropped as her daughter’s eighth-grade virtual language arts classroom discussed the Capitol attack.

Sanio, a former fifth grade teacher, was pleased with the way the teacher handled it. Her daughter, 14, had been talking about the Jan. 6 events with her friends outside school.

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The teacher, Heather Buchanan, said she made her students back their opinions with facts from reliable sources.

“I just allowed them to go ahead,” she said. “I could tell they’d been talking at home about it.”

But this was a classroom full of gifted students in eighth grade that had already tackled last summer’s Black Lives Matter protests and clashes with police. Most of the other students at Henderson Middle School hadn’t yet discussed the ransacking of the Capitol, said Principal Rochelle Patillo. She said the topic seems most on point for middle school students in eighth grade, when they study Georgia history. Maybe more students will be able to talk about it later, she said. She would want to get parents on board first, though.

“Because it is a very hot topic,” she said, “a very controversial topic.”

About the Author



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Ty Tagami writes about K-12 education, focusing on statewide issues.

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