

7.6 Privilege Walk

Educator Objective

Educators will become aware of the concepts of unconscious privilege and opportunities, as well as the effects that they have on their lives and the lives of their students.

Overview

Privilege Walk is a very powerful activity connected to privilege and the advantages and opportunities that it offers to individuals, races, or cultural groups. McIntosh (1989) first developed the activity, and it has been widely used and modified in the quarter-century since. During this activity, forward and backward movements will represent advantage (i.e., privilege) or disadvantage, as connections are made with education and opportunity. However, it is important that the educators draw connections beyond their own experiences—connecting the different experiences in the room with the different experiences that their students have before coming into their classrooms. This activity is not designed to judge, place blame, or even look at our own experiences as one of power or privilege; rather, it's intended to foster a recognition that regardless of what experiences we have all had in life, all of our students are just as capable of achieving success. The debriefing of this activity, as outlined, will be key to its success.

Note: The Privilege Walk activity should always be preceded by building trust among the group members and creating a safe environment. The activity can trigger challenging questions and emotions, so it should be conducted by a facilitator who feels comfortable handling sensitive issues that might arise during the discussion or debrief. It is not advised to conduct this activity with students; however, there are suggested adaptations included within the extensions.

Materials/Set-Up

- Educator Resources:
 - 7.6a: Privilege Walk Activity Statements
 - 7.6b: Privilege Walk Debrief
- A large, open room or area (e.g., gymnasium, outside covered pavilion, open field)
- Microphone or sound amplifying device (if necessary)

Instructional Steps

- Ask educators to think about their own personal definition of privilege by posing the following question: “What does it mean to be privileged?” Seek out volunteers to share their responses.

- Before heading to the activity area:
 - Remind educators that they will step out of their comfort zones to get a visual perspective of the background and experiences of each other (and their students), and that regardless of their own experiences, their job as educators is to bring all of their students to a place of success.
 - Ask group members to pair up with a “debrief buddy.” On the way to the Privilege Walk area, the debrief buddies should discuss their favorite childhood game(s). This builds rapport between the buddies, as they will be the first ones to speak with each other after the Privilege Walk. It also supports the notion of commonalities and differences being present between individuals from diverse backgrounds. The buddies do not need to stand next to each other during the activity, as they will strictly be sharing partners for the debrief portion.
- At the activity area:
 - Ask educators to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in a straight line, in the middle of the gymnasium, field, etc. without speaking.
 - Instruct educators to listen carefully to each sentence being read aloud and take the step required if the sentence applies to them.
 - You can also let the educators know that if they do not wish to share information on a given item, they can stay where they are, but encourage them to push outside of their comfort zone, if possible.
 - Read the Privilege Walk Activity Statements aloud, pausing after each sentence to allow educators the time to take steps as directed.
- Before returning to the training room, utilize the Privilege Walk Debrief resource to conduct Debrief, Part 1 of the essential debrief.
- Continue Debrief, Part 2: “Reverse the Walk” when educators have returned to the training room.
- Bring closure to the Privilege Walk, reminding educators of the following points:
 - “While you responded personally to the Privilege Walk statements that may have taken you back to a time when things were hard for you, you made it!”
 - “Most of your responses to the questions were out of your control. Where you were born, the environment into which you were born, and what others believed about you are beyond your ability to directly change. However, as educators, we have a unique ability to influence what types of expectations we set for our students, what we allow or don’t allow to be said and done in our classroom, and whether students can come into our classes knowing they are safe, appreciated, and cared for.”
 - “We, as educators, have to meet students where they are and show them the way to move forward. It’s about our students.”
- Share other types of “walks” in which educators could engage (e.g., “College Walk”).

Extension

- To modify the activity for educators, prior to or after the Privilege Walk, show “The Miniature Earth” video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4639vev1Rw>), which reveals an eye-opening set of statistics about the concept of privilege as it relates to people across the Earth.
- To modify the activity for use with students:
 - Intentionally create or use questions that you know will help your students understand they are not the only ones dealing with specific circumstances or sharing these experiences. It would be a way to create a visual “connection,” so they know that they are not alone.
 - Consider using a different example of privilege that could be shared with your students, such as, “This Teacher Taught His Class A Powerful Lesson About Privilege” (<http://www.buzzfeed.com/nathanwpyle/this-teacher-taught-his-class-a-powerful-lesson-about-privil#.rr24nk4L6L>).
 - For lower grade levels, make statements about common interests, home life, and school. For example, “Do you have any pets? Do you walk to school? Do you have any siblings? Is art your favorite subject? Do you live with your grandparents?”
 - With secondary and higher education students, review the Privilege Walk Activity Statements and discern which questions may be appropriate for your specific class.



Privilege Walk Activity Statements

1. If your primary ethnic identity is American, take one step forward.
2. If you were ever called names because of your race, class, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.
3. If you were ever ashamed or embarrassed of your clothes, house, car, etc., take one step back.
4. If your ancestors came to the United States not by choice, take one step back.
5. If you were raised in an area where there was prostitution, drug activity, etc., take one step back.
6. If you ever tried to change your appearance, mannerisms, or behavior to avoid being judged or ridiculed, take one step back.
7. If you studied the culture of your ancestors in elementary school, take one step forward.
8. If your primary language was not English when you went to school, take one step back.
9. If you were encouraged in your home to read during your childhood, take one step forward.
10. If you ever had to skip a meal or were hungry because there was not enough money to buy food when you were growing up, take one step back.
11. If you were taken to social activities—including art galleries, operas, or plays—by your parents, take one step forward.
12. If one of your parents was unemployed or laid off, not by choice, take one step back.
13. If you attended private school or summer camp, take one step forward.
14. If your family ever had to move because they could not afford the rent, take one step back.
15. If you were told that you were beautiful, smart, and capable by your parents, take one step forward.
16. If you were ever discouraged from academics or jobs because of race, class, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.
17. If you were raised in a single-parent household, take one step back.
18. If your family owned the house where you grew up, take one step forward.
19. If you saw members of your race, ethnic group, gender, or sexual orientation portrayed on television in degrading roles, take one step back.
20. If you were ever offered a job because of your association with a friend or family member, take one step forward.
21. If you were ever denied an academic or work experience because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.
22. If you were paid less or treated unfairly because of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.

- 23.** If you were ever accused of cheating or lying and believe it was due to your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.
- 24.** If you ever inherited money or property, take one step forward.
- 25.** If you had to rely primarily on the school bus for transportation, take one step back.
- 26.** If you had to rely primarily on a teacher, coach, or friend's family member for a ride home after extracurricular activities, take one step back.
- 27.** If you were ever stopped or questioned by the police and believe it was due to your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.
- 28.** If you were ever afraid of violence because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.
- 29.** If you were generally able to avoid places that were dangerous, take one step forward.
- 30.** If you were ever uncomfortable about a joke related to your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation but felt unsafe to confront the situation, take one step back.
- 31.** If you were ever the victim of violence related to your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.
- 32.** If your parents grew up outside of the United States, take one step back.
- 33.** If your parents grew up in a two-parent household, take one step forward.
- 34.** If your parents told you that you could be anything you wanted to be, take one step forward.
- 35.** If it was assumed from a young age that you would go to college, take one step forward.
- 36.** If you have been followed in a store and believe it was because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.
- 37.** If no one in your immediate family has ever been addicted to drugs or alcohol, take one step forward.
- 38.** If you went on regular family vacations, take one step forward.
- 39.** If you don't have to cope with frequent catcalls because of your gender, take one step forward.
- 40.** If you were expected to graduate from a four-year college/university, take one step forward.
- 41.** If at least one of your parents had college experience, take one step forward. If both of your parents had college experience, take two steps forward.
- 42.** If at least one of your parents graduated from a four-year university, take one step forward. If both of your parents graduated from a four-year university, take two steps forward.
- 43.** If there was someone with a master's degree in your home growing up, take one step forward.
- 44.** If there was someone with a doctorate degree in your home growing up, take one step forward.

Privilege Walk Debrief

Once you have read through the last statement of the Privilege Walk and educators are standing in their final positions, guide them through the following debrief activity.

Debrief, Part 1

Say the following aloud:

- “Close your eyes and think about all of your experiences that have formed you into the well-educated person who you are today. Think about the educators and adults in your life that helped form you into the person who you are today.”
- “Open your eyes and look around the room to see the role that a variety of experiences played in ultimately forming us all into well-educated adults.”
- “Try to imagine what attributes the educators and adults had that surrounded and supported the others in the room to get them to where they are today.”
- “When we start the school year, this is what our classrooms look like. Students come to us from all different experiences and backgrounds, but our mission needs to be to close the achievement and opportunity gap by preparing all students, no matter their experiences and backgrounds, for college readiness and success in a global society.”
- “We know that all of the experiences read in the Privilege Walk will affect our students’ chances of succeeding in education. For example, low-income students are statistically less likely to go to college, and in contrast, students whose parents have advanced degrees are more likely to go to college.”
- “Imagine that you all are a group of our students coming into our school for the first time. If I had \$10,000, stood in the front, and said, ‘Whoever gets to me first gets the money,’ what would happen?”
- “Someone in the front would get it. The ones in the middle might try, but they would have to really hustle and maneuver. And the people in the back, they won’t even try. Why? Because they believe that they do not have a chance. There are too many obstacles, and they think, ‘Why even try? There is no point.’”
- “Think again of our students in the classroom. The teacher has the knowledge, stands in front, and offers it to anyone who can come and get it, and then wonders why the kids in the back never try...never move.”
- “The teacher has to meet the students where they are and bring them forward. [As you read the preceding sentence, walk toward the back of the room and bring an educator back toward the front.] The teacher has to build a relationship with the students, so they trust the teacher, and the teacher has to show them the way to overcome their obstacles. The teacher has to show the way because our students don’t see it. We have to show them!”

Ask educators to pair with their “debrief buddy” from earlier and debrief the activity further, as they walk back to the room where the activity began. Have the buddy pairs discuss the following questions:

- “What did you think and feel as we went through this activity?”
- “How can you connect this experience with your students?”

Debrief, Part 2: “Reverse the Walk”

Once back in the training area, continue the debrief. Ask educators to extend their thinking from awareness of the issues raised by the Privilege Walk to what they can do as educators to help students rise above the differing levels of previous opportunities in their lives (to “reverse the walk”). Offer the following prompting questions as a guide for small-group discussions:

- How can you use this experience to better inform your work as an educator in the future?
- What were some of those attributes of caring/supportive adults that you imagined surrounding yourself and others in the room? Which of those attributes could you better incorporate into your interactions with students?
- What steps can you take or resources can you use in your classroom or school to address the disparity in opportunities or personal foundations for students?

