Some racial+ language  
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The words we can use to name racial identities are informed by denotation, connotation, history of usage and impact, generation, region, convention and invention. While there is no universally right or correct language for everyone—and some people identify themselves in different ways, depending on context, relationship or occasion—we can educate ourselves about etymology and usage to discern helpful language to name race when it’s vital to talk concretely and specifically about racial identity in order to advance equity and inclusion (ex. talking about “diverse” students is less clear than talking about “students of color,” and neither of those is clear enough if we need to talk specifically about black and Latino boys disproportionately struggling in a culturally white system in which Asian students seem to be thriving academically, even though they’re also in the minority). Below are incomplete notes about some common racial terms. And that’s kind of the point. As you read, consider what’s useful, what questions come up for you and what else would be helpful in trying to have the conversations you need to have in your school and community.

Black or African-American?
Black is a racial term, while African-American describes an ethnicity. While technically inequivalent, 65% of people who may be identified as black or African-American reported that “it doesn’t matter” which term people use (Gallup, 2013). But there is a difference as far as bias goes: studies (Hall et al., 2015; Philogène, 2005) show that for white people “black” carries more negative connotations than “African-American.”

When the term “Negro” appeared alongside Black and African-American in the 2010 US Census (as it had in previous censuses), there was backlash to the term (for being “outdated” and “offensive”). Although the Census Bureau had included the term to be inclusive (recognizing that in 2000, more than 56,000 people had written in “Negro” as their preferred self-identification), the Bureau Director responded to the controversy with a public explanation of and reflection on the process of vetting the race question wording (including acknowledging that “some research on the sensitivity of answers to the presence of ‘Negro’ should have been done last decade”). According to NPR, “Census Bureau research and public feedback turned up different results, so moving forward ‘Negro’ will not be an option.”

Diverse?
Using “diverse” as a synonym for a person or group of color is problematic because it suggests that they’re “different,” which implies—intentionally or not—that white people are somehow not different (i.e. normal). While it would be accurate to describe a group as racially diverse if it’s comprised of people of different races, none of those individuals is diverse themselves.
Latino or Hispanic... or Latinx?
Latino is a regionally-descriptive term, referring to people of Latin American origin, whereas Hispanic is linguistically-descriptive, referring to Spanish-speaking people. In the same 2013 Gallup poll cited above, 70% of people who may be identified as Hispanic or Latino reported no preference.

Latinx (plural “Latinxs”) is a gender-neutral/inclusive term. While its etymology is unclear, its coinage has been attributed to queer US American Spanish speakers in the 21st century. Other alternatives include Latin@ and Latine. Resistance to the term Latinx from within global Spanish-speaking communities (including those that support greater gender inclusion) assert that the term is an “attempted degradation of our language at the hands of a foreign influence” (Guerra & Orbea, 2015).

Minority
The use of the term “minority” to refer to groups that are historically or currently underrepresented may actually reinforce the idea that there’s an appropriate ceiling or cap to their representation in a community—i.e. there being only a few members of a “minority” group in a community may seem sufficient (after all, they’re a minority). The term “under-represented” not only names the status of a group, it also breaks out of a dichotomy (minority v. majority) and invites a community to consider what representation is sufficient: who is under-represented, and who is well-represented?

Model minority
A term coined by sociologist William Pettersen to describe Japanese-Americans in 1966, whom he declared to be “better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites” in terms of education, income, family stability and law-abidingness. In contrast with so-called “problem minorities,” the “model minority” paradigm is designed to pit minority groups against each other. Today, the descriptor “model minority” is “the stereotype applied to a minority group that is seen as reaching higher educational, professional, and socioeconomic levels without protest against the majority establishment [emphasis added]” (OpenStax College, 2012).

Multiracial and mixed race?
While both terms refer to people whose heritage includes more than one race, for some people, “mixed race” carries more historical connotations of illegality, social impropriety and shame than the more contemporary term “multiracial.” Mixed race may also imply confusion, conflict or fragmentation of identities. That said, some folks identity as mixed race.

Native American, Indian or First Nations?
While the term “Indian” has been criticized for inaccuracy (consider the confusion with “Indian,” meaning from India), for its coinage by European settlers of the Americas and for the pejorative connotations it has accrued, “American Indian” was also the preferred term of self-
identification for 50% of American Indians/Native Americans, according to the 1995 US Census. American Indian, Indian, Native American and identification by one’s specific nation continue to be ways people self-identify in the US. First Nations is more commonly, but not exclusively, used in Canada.

The n-word
“It’s not fair that you don’t get to say the n-word unless you’re black.” Are the rules different when it comes to slang, including racial slurs, for your own group? Yes. Why? Because when you’re a member of a group, you have to live with the consequences of derogatory language about who you are. It’s actually people who aren’t black who “get” to say the n-word with immunity from its brutal and lethal penalties. That the rules of language are different depending on the speaker and the audience is not particular to racial slang and slurs. For teaching resources on the n-word, check out this article from Teaching Tolerance and this post from blogger J Smooth.

People of color
A term used primarily in the US that variously refers (1) only to black people, (2) to black and Latino people, or (3) to all people who are not white. In part because of the “model minority” stereotype, Asians may or may not identify or be identified as people of color. As far as self-identification, some people do not identify as being “of color,” even if they identify as non-white. Generation, immigration and connotation may influence identification with this term.

People of color and colored people?
Etymologically, these terms are actually a lot alike: each has been used to identify non-white people and justify and perpetuate racism against them; each has been used both to mean only black people, and also anyone who isn’t white; and each has been used to self-identify by the people they’re supposed to describe—just at different times, in different socio-historical contexts. While “colored people” remains in use as part of the acronym NAACP (as it was named originally in 1909), it is heard more as a slur when used colloquially in part because of its association with institutionalized racism in the pre-civil rights US.

White or Caucasian?
Whereas white is a racial term, Caucasian is a regional term referring to the Caucasus that includes the people of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Russia, Turkey and the partially and unrecognized states of Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Like black and African-American, white and Caucasian are not equivalent terms, and preference for one term over the other may be about perceived connotations more than accuracy of usage.

Yellow for Asian?
This goes to show that there are few hard and fast rules about acceptable and unacceptable racial language. While “black” and “yellow” both have negative connotations (evil and cowardly, respectively) and have been used derogatively to justify and perpetuate racist
systems, practices and attitudes, yellow has not been broadly accepted by Asian or Asian-American communities as a self-describing term. In this sense, “yellow” is like “red” (when used to describe Native Americans).

It’s not just racial terminology that’s evolving and can be confusing.

- Consider the growth of language to name the spectrum of **gender** identities:
  - “A Gender Spectrum Glossary” from Teaching Tolerance
  - “Comprehensive* List of LGBTQ+ Vocabulary Definitions” from Sam Killermann’s *It’s Pronounced Metrosexual*
  - “The Language of Gender” from Gender Spectrum
- And how language to name **sexual orientation**, like language to name race, continues to evolve, responding to usage, sometimes by reclaiming slurs (ex. “queer”) and sometimes by rejecting language that is still denotative or even preferred by others (ex. “lesbian”)
- There’s also the language to name identity based on **language** status. The term “emergent bi/multilingual learner” was **coined** “to reject the deficit-oriented terminology of LEP, ELLs, or ESL students” and recognize the fact that learning another language (whether English or other) is adding to one’s resources and assets.
- And, of course, there’s the evolution in the language to name **physical, learning and other abilities**-based status: lame, handicapped, the handicapped, people with disabilities, disabled people, differently-abled people. The perpetual **shifts** in how US society refers to disabilities-based identities reflect how negative connotations can—and sometimes do—overwhelm the denotation of a term, compelling us to find a more “neutral” or “inoffensive” way to say what we mean. Like with racial nomenclature, the use of “difference” to describe abilities status is problematic when enabled and abled people aren’t included in the umbrella of “differences.” We need to be able to name when people aren’t just different but different in a way that disables or enables them in a way that’s vital to their ability to thrive. To do this, we need to name accurately and clearly not just what we think of as “different” or “disadvantaged,” but also whatever we think of as “normal”—ex. neurotypical learners, English-only learners, white people, cisgender men and cisgender women, learning enabled and physically enabled students.
- The change in abilities language also reflects an emphasis on people as people first that is mirrored in the language used to name **homeless** status. Rather than referring to homeless people or the homeless (which is even more dehumanizing), describing people as “experiencing homelessness” emphasizes that their current experience and circumstances aren’t necessarily persistent or defining. It also admits a social bias (whether good or bad, still true) toward changing that experience.