

How Race and Racism Empower a School's Curriculum

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Abstract: *Teaching students about race and racism is so multi-faceted and complex, yet it remains the most pivotal conversation and lesson to have with young people to empower them. One of the effective ways Americans can attempt to unravel and transform this complex legacy is to make it a part of a school's curriculum. Allowing race and racism to remain a hidden-aspect of a school's curriculum reinforces its trivialization and dysfunction.*

Indeed, having constructed, well-thought-out lessons about race and racism "myth-bust" any attempts for future Americans to continually embrace xenophobia and genetic inferiority. In recent years, the institution of education and schooling has shown progress changing young people's mindsets toward the LGBTQ community, diverse learners, and disabled citizens. Why has this slowly occurred with changing people's ideologues when dealing with race and racism? It is because educators, typically, find it difficult to broach this sensitive subject within their school community and curriculum.

Without using educational tools and resources, found within a contemporary school curriculum, Americans will remain uneducated and ignorant about how to push back against racism's ugly head, e.g. police agencies, banking institutions, real-estate markets, and health care. That is why every attempt needs to be made by schools to change how young people view race and racism.

Reality of Race and Racism

For some people the word racism searstoughts of concerns, especially when a teacher plans to broach this topic with a set of young people or students. Questions, quite often, allege what is the point unless it is already apart of a teaching unit or curriculum topic either reviewing the Civil Rights Movement, Farm Workers Movement, or Nazi Germany? The nervousness of what sometimes goes on for a teacher to address this pivotal topic makes quite a few educators avoid the topic altogether. Besides a person's home environment, where else can a young person or student feel comfortable enough to properly address or discuss race and racism if not school? Without a doubt, the conversation of race and racism is so multifaceted and seemingly always a current topic on the minds of the American people. From President Barack Obama's comments about recent police shootings, Bernie Sanders addressing racial inequity, or Donald Trump's perspectives on social justice movements, race and racism constantly surfaces as a major media headline. As former heavy weight champion Joe Louis once commented, "You can run, but you cannot hide" (Roberts, 11). Meaning people cannot escape racism's wrath. Without facing it head on and dealing with it, the problem always surfaces. That is why it is dire schools get on board with teaching students how to address and manage the complexities of race and racism.

After all school is a safe protected space, an insulated learning time, designed to properly educate and teach people how to embrace their differences. Indeed this topic requires more coverage within a school's curriculum to better prepare future voters, leaders, and professionals how to critically interact, engage, and evoke a common ground between ethnic groups. To deny that a critical conversation around race and racism should not coexist within a school curriculum is to instigate and continue to intellectually disarm people to not progressively work together or get along with different ethnicities. Just to say a school has a very diverse population of learners or a class on African American History is clearly not enough and explains Tatum's (2003) text narrative of *Why are All The Black Kids Sitting Together In The Cafeteria*. In fact, when a school does have a course on African American History it usually houses majority of African Americans. Without a doubt, a well-balanced class roster should be identified previous to making this course available because this would surely encourage different ethnicities to engage new facts, information, narratives, and events that shape the American experience while advancing their understanding of the important contributors, actors, and actresses developing world history.

For one, the history of America was founded on the concept of race and racism. It is American as "Cherry Pie" organic to the nation's heritage, culture, and framework. So it is really an unavoidable topic because it is the "pink elephant" in a schoolhouse. Despite it being America's ugly birth mark, the nation has come a long way since the time of Chattel Slavery, Jim Crow, Native American genocidal policies, and Japanese Internment camps. The topic of race and racism does not only speak about the hardships and challenges citizens have overcome to progress this nation, but also it teaches people about their identity of who they are and where they come from. Race and racism is what makes America the world's great "experimental melting pot," and students should know how this powerful legacy informs, enlightens, and reflects

their consciousness. That way, students can grow up feeling more comfortable having conversations with each other about this topic to build bridges that unite folks rather than separate them.

Why Not Race and Racism?

Teaching students about race and racism has to become an intricate part of a school's curriculum, especially as it pertains to subjects such as, history, science, and English. Math also should certainly not be left out in this discussion because it is one of the greatest philosophies humans have ever known. Math is not just a simple abstract course not relevant to anything besides solving equations. Prior to students engaging how to solve math equations, they should be provided a philosophical lesson on the origins of where the math function was derived. Take, for instance, the concept of the Pythagoras Theorem. Although it is referred to as a Greek philosophical math concept, the theorem actually derived itself from Imhotep, a mathematical genius, scientist, and architect from Egypt. When the Greeks traveled to Egypt, such as Pythagoras, he studied and learned this mathematical formula from Imhotep's scholars and brought it back to Greece to teach his fellow citizens how to apply this concept (Bernal, 1987). Without question this lesson should appear as a topic of philosophical engagement with learners, so they may learn the genius of other people that existed centuries prior to America's development. This will arm students to do away with "centrism" while evoking their conversation to learn more about other ethnic math geniuses such as Benjamin Banneker, Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, or contemporary math scholar David Ruelle.

Better yet, take the case of an educator having to teach a British English class. As naïve it may sound to strategically be able to discuss race and racism in this particular course, all one has to do is start with the fact that Britain at one time colonized and controlled two-thirds of the world. This point alone further explains why a greater part of the planet speaks English. How is it possible a country the size of New York dominated the world for hundreds of years where it was once stated the "sun will never set" on its empire? Such a fact serves as a great essential question for students to explore and review introducing the course or discussing the *Victorian Era*. There is so much more about teaching a class of this nature that one cannot simply ignore race and racism, particularly when having the chance to compose an instructional unit about either British India or British Africa to address diversity in the course. Without question Achebe's *When Things Fall Apart* or *Rushdie's Midnight Child* texts should find themselves within a teacher's syllabus for this course. Yet, when a syllabus of this class only yields itself to Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, or Stevenson's *Strange Case of Jekyll and Hyde* it fails to include people of color histories and identities. This is where racism often takes root in education when it ignores the literature, music, art, and religion of "other people."

Applying a Cultural Relevant and Valued Driven Pedagogy (CVD)

What a CVD allows an educator to do is create a value driven pedagogy within his or her classroom, so that students can relate and connect with the learning material (Ali and Murphy 2013). A CVD model manifests itself from the tenets of Ladson-Billings (2009) cultural relevant model (CRM). Ladson-Billings suggests that a CRM entices students to want to engage a curriculum because they see themselves within the content and material and no longer feel alienated from the instructional focus. Ladson-Billings proved through her research that when students are provided learning materials that apply to them, they garner greater engagement and become more disciplined learners. In addition, students acquire efficacy, feeling good about themselves and their learning journey. Ali and Murphy (2013) expound on this point believing that when students apply a CRM, learners place greater value of the lesson or instruction. Not only are they able to identify and place themselves within the curriculum, but also they discover how the learned concept or thought adds value and meaning to their world. A CVD does more than just have students value the curriculum and feel good, it also creates a cultural lens for students to guide, interpret, navigate, and assess their learning experience. Without doing so, students can quite often have a great relationship with a teacher, but not necessarily like with the material or content they are learning. What strengthens the value of a CRM is when students see the point or value of learning a lesson.

When teaching about race and racism both a CRM and CVD are useful because lessons are made to connect to students' intellectual need, especially around a critical or difficult conversation about race and racism that can evoke radical emotions. The use of a CRM and CVD allow students to become facilitators, practitioners, and investigators of their own learning reviewing a challenged topic of this nature, so that they may develop their own critical understanding. Of course teachers help to navigate students to identify resources and instructional cues to support their comprehension about specific course themes and details of this topic, yet these instructional pedagogies are also necessary to help students make meaning out of a conversation about race and racism to deter extreme or dismissive thoughts.

Refusing to Apply Race and Racism

Herbert Kohl (1995) explored the concept of how dangerous it is for schools to ignore the conversation about race and racism when reviewing a school in southern Texas. Kohl discussed how a mural within a school was held up with great pride to reflect the institution's legacy and history. The mural was the first major thing a person would see entering the school building. Despite the school having a majority Latino or Chicano student population residing in an economically challenged Latino community, the mural showcased a slogan, "Great Things Happen To Children Like Ours" with all of the children appearing white like the principal. Kohl goes on to approach the principal repudiating the mural stating, "When I suggested to the principal that the display might present a negative image to the students and community, I was told that I didn't understand. The children on the wall were models for his student body, examples of what they could achieve if only they tried. When I asked him what he imagined the students thought about seeing those models day after day and knowing that they didn't look like any children at the school, he launched into a tirade against multiculturalism..." (92). One would think this would be highly offensive and sensitive to majority of the student body and parents that attended the school. However, the principal did not see it this way. When approached by several parents to modify the mural to reflect the school population he refused. As Kohl strongly asserts, "We need to study Western cultures to understand our past. We need to study Western cultures to understand our future" (99). What a person can assess from this whole ordeal is that when leaders and teachers invest in "centrism" of any kind versus diversity, what they are doing is omitting the cultural significance of other people. Without question the principal should have made it a point to include all members of his school community. Yet he did not deem it important, which alienated an entire student body from the school.

If students cannot be recognized on the walls or classrooms of a school building, it is for certain they are also being ignored in the curriculum. Eventually this principal resigned and went elsewhere, which served the greater good of the school community. However, leaders and teachers play a powerful role with making sure to not only recognize people of color within their schoolhouses, but also provide them with access to powerful teaching modicums that strengthen their resolve to become successful captains of history. Without doing so only consigns and relegates people into subordinate categories. Lisa Delpit (2006) furthers this topic of conversation in her text, *Other People's Children* when she argues, "...I propose that those of us responsible for teaching them (children from communities of color) realize that they bring different kinds of understanding about the world than those whose home lives are more similar to the worldview underlying Western schooling. I have found that if I want to learn how best to teach children who may be different from me, then I must seek advice of adults – teachers and parents – who are from the same culture as my students" (102). Students by nature are from different or varied backgrounds and require an investigation to learn more about them. To simply believe all students are the same because they come from a similar racial or cultural background is foolish.

This means teachers must take time to learn about the individual student plus their cultural heritage. Lessons should be formatted along these lines to empower or strengthen students' responsiveness to the curriculum. If educators do not see the value of this important concept, they should not stand before students of color. Conversations about race and racism within a curriculum empower an educator's ability in a classroom by encouraging them to develop more creative ways to impact students' learning. In such a setting, learners also are motivated and encouraged to want to learn more about their peers. A deeper connection surfaces that does away with the artificial boundaries constructed around school diversity. Just because a school is diverse does not mean for one minute everybody gets along. To ensure students and adults are learning from each other while respecting their cultural backgrounds, it is dire conversations around race and racism emerge within a curriculum to do away with ignorance.

Race and Racism: Where Did It Come From?

Applying race and racism into a curriculum and school can be addressed in so many ways. For certain having this topic embedded within a curriculum accommodates cultural perspectives while giving teachers and students an opportunity to make sense of the world they live in. It further provides students with a chance to balance what they are learning from social media, mainstream media, or home. The message about race and racism can garner a greater understanding for young people to progress society beyond its already varied distortions, conceptions, and misunderstandings. Before discussing how to best move society along a continuum regarding this difficult topic, it is important students are made aware about the origins of race and racism.

For centuries to justify the slave trade, Native American extermination policies, Irish-and-Italian immigration acts, or the Chinese Exclusionary law, multiple ethnic groups were discussed as having a genetic deficit defining their origins. Not only did eugenics, nativist, and republican architects buy into this abnormal logic, they also attempted to verify various ethnic groups as inferior through scientific measures or tools. Takahi (2000) discusses in his book how experiments were used to qualify African Americans as subhuman specimens. First, scientist and certain founding pioneers like Thomas Jefferson alleged African Americans were the most generically inferior race on the planet (Takahi, 2000). Dr. Benjamin Rush, a founding member of the U.S.

Constitution and signing member to the *Declaration of Independence*, alleged African Americans suffered from leprosy requiring dutiful medical treatment to return them to a normal human status. Dr. Rush's experiments were twisted and torturous even going so far as to bleed out his experimental hosts to prove a cure was possible. Learning this sort of information is painful and traumatic to say the least, but this scientific story must be told to students so they can learn from the past and no longer be confined to its whims. Takahi (2008) goes on to say, "I believe our education system as a whole has not integrated the histories of all people into our education system, just the Eurocentric view of itself, and the White-centered view of African Americans, and even this is slim to nonexistent. What I find is that most people don't know the fact they don't know, because of the complete lack of information (43)." Without addressing this content within a school's curriculum, it allows such maleficence to remain hidden spurring xenophobia while giving ignorant notions a boost to treat "other" people less and unfairly. History cannot be wiped away or dismissed as though it never happen. It exists as part of America's heritage and should be embraced as such.

There are multiple ways a science teacher can address this issue in their class while educating students about the nature of race. For one thing, humans are linked to a single gene called, mitochondria. This gene, according to scientist, is a DNA cell that proves all humans derive from the same origin. Although humans look different by way of skin tone, hair, and facial features, environment had a bigger role to play with constructing how people look. To survive harsh climates or changing environments within the earth's ecosystem, people physiology shifted or changed to genetically survive (Browder, 1989). A sort of evolutionary gate was opened permitting humans to adapt to their environment. This narrative, in itself, is well told and requires discussion with students to dismiss the awful stereotype that race was somehow constructed by nature rather than humans that sought to categorize different people as inferior for power, exploitation, and conquest (Diamond, 1999).

There is no better place to start such a discussion other than biology or science class. The misnomer that some ethnic groups are genetically inferior can be put to rest within this class. Unfortunately this nonsensical notion especially surfaces in education when discussing the black-and-white learning gap, which is quantified by standardized test results. Herrnstein and Murray (1994) text entitled the *Bell Curve* added to this tone of reasoning when suggesting, "But school is in itself, more immediately and directly than any other institution, the place where people of high cognitive ability excel and people of low cognitive ability fail" (56). What renders students to perform more admirably in school, from their perspective, deals with students' genetic material, otherwise known as DNA, to yield quality results? So if African Americans and Latino Americans continue to yield low test results compared to their White and Asian counterparts it must be tied to their genetic origins.

Why else are so many of these students failing to succeed in education when other groups are doing so well? This message captures the sentiments of eugenics from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which gives some people, especially policyholders, justification to explain why urban public schools lack quality investments because far too many students of color yield greater dropout rates, lower test scores, and behavioral challenges within American schools (Ali, 2016). But a teacher or anyone connected to education supporting such a disposition is completely wrong when considering Delpit's (2013) suggestion that, "Every human brain has the built-in capacity to become, over time, what we demand of it. No ability is fixed. Practice can even change the brain" (9). If there exists a notion that everybody or anyone can learn and achieve, why is it that children of color are constantly viewed as possessing inferior intelligence? Educators believing any student, for that matter, cannot learn from them pose a real danger to society further reinforcing Ku Klux Klan symptoms. Notions of these eugenics beliefs continue to manifest itself into the public space from important political figures. In fact, Chicago's Mayor Rahm Emanuel was once quoted by Chicago Teacher Union (CTU) President Karen Lewis for saying, "That 25 percent of the students in this city are never going to be anything, never going to amount to anything and he was never going to throw money at them" (Ahern, 2011). Of course the mayor denied such sentiments despite the CTU president swearing up-and-down this was stated. But how many times are such feelings or beliefs discussed privately behind closed doors within households, fiscal offices, or governmental dwellings? This is why it is essential learners are provided an opportunity to learn about the origins of race and racism to dispel, challenge, and repudiate the "lie" and myth about race and racism.

Racism Is A Mental Health Challenge

When concerns of racism draw a "red flag" from mainstream society, it signals that majority of people view the actions of an individual, group, or institution as offensive. Terrible anxieties and social discomforts soon manifest from some people because racism brings fourth consigned mental fears about past wrongs, social challenges, and historical incidents. For example Taneshi Coats (2015) states, "Racism is not merely a simplistic hatred. It is, more often, broad sympathy toward some and broader skepticism toward others..." (32). Not only does a heavy generalization of "others" emerge, but also a sort of deductive reasoning is unleashed to portray specific ethnic groups as threatening and inferior. This becomes very hard for one group to "shake off" or elude because these members have to constantly fight to prove their social worthiness and professional belongingness. From the 2016 Presidential Republican nominee, any number of racial offensive comments, to

Fox News Show host Bill O'Reilly's statement that enslaved Africans were "Well fed and had decent lodgings provided by the government," these views seemingly always find a way to appear in America's public life (Ventura, 2016). Rather than ignore these individuals or their statements, schools must address a Bill O'Reilly's comment stressing to students either through a science or history course that many slaves died as a result of malnourishment, especially children whose life expectancy was seven years (Blassingame, 1979). In fact many children were prone to acquiring a metabolic disease because they lacked proper nutrition from their mother's diet prior to conception (Kellen, 1994).

What becomes more necessary is for schools to create engaging dialogues through their curriculum to deconstruct harmful messaging that can take place either through classroom warm up assignments, free write activities, or journal reflections. For schools to dismiss or ignore these damning perspectives as nonessential or simply "ignorant" without teaching why these statements are so ridiculous excuses them while reinforcing its suggestive tonality. To start with, schools already have a platform, through their curriculum, to engage students to do away with racist thoughts from previous generations. Schools must continue to advocate for races while teaching social justice to disavow hate mongering. Historically speaking, since the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, schools have come along way with taking the lead on changing race and racism in America. Along with other major educational policy rulings, the institution of education have taught people the importance of embracing diversity and differences, e.g. LGBTQ, disabilities, racial equity and equality, women's rights. This should not stop, but become even more progressive. Schools that effectively establish teacher workshops or professional days to help teachers align their curriculum around topics of race and racism not only empower and impact teachers, but also students. Other school activities could include a diversity week, cultural attire week, a cultural food connoisseurship week in the cafeteria, and etc. The point here is that schools should not just stop with Black History Month, Women's Month, or LGBTQ Month, but offer a whole host of activities and events inclusive of these months' cultural significance besides just offering a general assembly to students. It should remain constant and something experienced to impact students more greatly.

Generation of students continue to change every passing year. As American generations pass on, race and racism seemingly remains strong more than ever. For better or for worst, young people have to be taught in a positive manner how to push back against the past. Schools offer students a window to develop forward thinking to disarm racist tendencies through a progressive curriculum. A school's curriculum, more importantly, must continue to play a role reducing young people's fears, anxieties, and mental health challenges to put their minds at ease to be able to talk about race and racism, their differences, and social challenges around racial equity. Schools certainly have a major say with preparing future generations of how to best get along with each other while working together to improve America.

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