

9-2018

## How Race and Racism Empower a School's Curriculum

Sunni Ali

*Northeastern Illinois University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri>



Part of the Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons, Community College Leadership Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Disability and Equity in Education Commons, Educational Psychology Commons, Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons, Elementary Education and Teaching Commons, International and Comparative Education Commons, Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons, Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons, and the Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Ali, Sunni (2018) "How Race and Racism Empower a School's Curriculum," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol4/iss1/1>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journal of Research Initiatives at DigitalCommons@Fayetteville State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Research Initiatives by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Fayetteville State University. For more information, please contact [dballar5@uncfsu.edu](mailto:dballar5@uncfsu.edu).

---

## How Race and Racism Empower a School's Curriculum

### About the Author(s)

Dr. Ali is a 5th-year assistant professor at Northeastern Illinois University in the Education Inquiry and Curriculum Studies Department (EICS). He has 20 years of high school teaching experience (12 years as a Social Science Instructor, 2 years of which were an administrator, and 8 years as a diverse learner instructor). He earned his doctorate in educational administration from Roosevelt University.

### Keywords

Culturally Responsive Education, Racism, Curriculum Inquiry



## HOW RACE AND RACISM EMPOWER A SCHOOL'S CURRICULUM

Sunni Ali, Northeastern Illinois University

### **Abstract**

Teaching students about race and racism are so multi-faceted and sophisticated, yet it remains the most crucial conversation and lesson to have with young people to empower them. One of the useful ways Americans can attempt to unravel and transform this complicated 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 breaking 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.

### **Introduction**

Let's face it, for some people the word racism sears thoughts 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 a part of a teaching unit or curriculum topic reviewing the Civil Rights Movement, Migrant Workers Movement, or Nazi Germany? The nervousness of what sometimes goes on for a teacher to address this central topic makes a few educators entirely avoid the problem altogether. Besides a person's home environment, where else can a young person or student feel comfortable enough to address or discuss race and racism if not school adequately? Without a doubt, the conversation about 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 continuously surface as a significant media headline. As former heavyweight champion, Joe Louis once commented, "You can run, but you cannot hide" (Roberts, p. xi); quite simply, this means 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 educate and teach people how to embrace their differences properly. 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 not progressively to work together or get along with different ethnicities. To say a school has a very diverse population of learners or a class on African American History is not enough and explains Tatum's (2003) text narrative of *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together In The Cafeteria*. When a school does have a course on African American History, it usually houses a majority of African Americans. Without a doubt, a well-balanced class roster should be identified previously to making this course available because this would inevitably encourage different ethnicities to engage new facts, information, narratives, and events that shape the American experience while advancing their understanding of the critical contributors, actors, and actresses developing world history.

For one, the history of America manifested from the concept of race and racism. It is American as “Cherry Pie” organic to the nation’s heritage, culture, and framework. So it is an unavoidable topic because it is the “pink elephant” in a schoolhouse. Despite it being America’s ugly birthmark, the nation has come a long way since the time of Chattel Slavery, Jim Crow, Native American genocidal policies, and Japanese Intern 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 off. Race and racism are 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 folks about race and racism have 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 probably not be left out in this discussion because it is one of the most significant philosophies humans have ever known. Math is not just a simple abstract course not relevant to anything besides solving equations. Before students engage with how to solve a math equation, a philosophical lesson on the origins of where the math function was derived must occur. Take, for instance, the concept of the Pythagoras Theorem. Although it refers to a Greek philosophical math concept, the theorem obtained 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 before America's development. Indeed, 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, or Mary Jackson.

Alternatively, let's take the case of 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 surface, which further explains why a more significant 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 rulers of this society once stated the "sun would never set" on its dominion? 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 Children* texts should find themselves within a teacher's syllabus for this course. 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. It is here 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 their classroom, so that students can relate and connect with the learning material (Author and Murphy 2013). A CVD model manifests itself in 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 in the content and material and no longer feel alienated from the instructional focus. Ladson-Billings proved through her research that when students learn information that applies to them, they garner greater engagement and become more disciplined learners. Also, students acquire efficacy, feeling good about themselves and their learning journey. Author and Murphy (2013) expound on this point believing that when students apply a CRM, learners place a higher value on the lesson or instruction. Not only are they able to identify and put themselves in the curriculum, but also they discover how the learned concept or thought adds value and meaning to their world. A CVD does more than have students value the curriculum and feel good, and 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 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 raw emotions. The use of a CRM and CVD allow students to become facilitators, practitioners, and investigators of their learning reviewing a challenging topic of this nature, so that they may develop their 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 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 its legacy and history. The painting was the first significant 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... (p. 92).

One would think this would be highly offensive and sensitive to the 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. However, as Kohl firmly believes, "We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs (p. 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. He did not deem it essential, which alienated an entire student body from the school. If students are not recognized on the walls or classrooms of a school building, it is for sure 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 dominant role with making sure to not only recognize people of color within their schoolhouses but also provide them with access to a powerful teaching modicum that strengthens their resolve to become successful captains of history. Without doing so only consigns and relegates people into inferior 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 the advice of adults – teachers and parents – who are from the same culture as my students" (p.102).

Students by nature are from different or varied backgrounds and require an investigation to learn more about them. To believe all students are the same because they come from a similar racial or cultural background is foolish, which means teachers must take time to learn about the individual student as well as 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 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 making them want to know about their students while also creative ways to engage their learning. In such a setting, learners are motivated and encouraged to want to learn more about their peers. A profound 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 empower a school's culture and climate to bring forth meaningful interactions that do away with ignorance.

### **Let's Talk About Race and Racism: Where Did It Come From?**

A school's curriculum can apply race and racism into a curriculum in so many ways. 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. 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 challenging topic, it is okay if students are made aware of 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 became categorized as genetically deficient. Not only did eugenics, nativist, and Republican architects buy into this strange 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 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, but this scientific story must be told to students so they can learn from the past and no longer confined to its whims. As 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 idea 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 (p. 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 happens. It exists as part of America's heritage and should embrace as such. There are multiple ways a science teacher can address this issue in their class while educating students about the nature of the race.

For one thing, humans come from a single gene called, mitochondria. This gene, according to scientists, 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, the environment had a role to play in constructing how people look. To survive harsh climates or to change environments within the earth's ecosystem, people physiology shifted or changed to survive genetically (Browder, 1989). An 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 a biology or science class. The misnomer that some ethnic groups are genetically inferior ceases to exist rest in this class. Unfortunately, this absurd 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" (p. 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 tests 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 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which gives some people, especially policyholders, justification to explain why urban public schools lack quality investments. Far too many students of color yield considerable dropout rates, lower test scores, and behavioral challenges within American schools (Author, 2016). However, a teacher or anyone connected to education supporting such a disposition is 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" (p. 9). If there exists a notion that everybody or anyone can learn and achieve, why is it that children of color somehow possess 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. However, how many times are such feelings or beliefs discussed privately behind closed doors within households, commercial offices, or governmental dwellings? Which explains why it is essential learners receive 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 about racism draw a "red flag" from folks and society as a whole, it signals that people have some real anxieties and concerns about what has been said or taken place. For many people, racism is a mental health challenge because it brings about people's dreaded fears about past wrongs, social challenges, and historical incidents. As Taneshi Coats (2015) states, "Racism is not merely a simplistic hatred. It is, more often, broad sympathy toward some and broader skepticism toward others..." (p. 32). Not only does a huge generalization of "others" emerge, but also a sort of deductive reasoning is unleashed to portray specific ethnic groups as threatening and inferior. It becomes hard for one group to "shake off" or elude because these members have to fight to prove their social worthiness and professional belongingness constantly.

From the 2016 Presidential Republican nominee, any number of racially 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). Many children were prone to acquiring a metabolic disease because they lacked proper nutrition from their mother's diet before 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 such ridiculous excuses them while reinforcing its suggestive tonality.

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 a long way in taking the lead on changing race and racism in America. Along with other significant educational policy rulings, the institution of education has taught people the importance of embracing diversity and differences, e.g., LGBTQ, disabilities, racial equity and equality, women's rights. As a result, this should not stop but become even more progressive.

Schools that 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, or a cultural food connoisseurship week in the cafeteria. 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 giving a general assembly to students. It should remain constant, and something experienced to impact students more greatly.

Generation of students continues to change every passing year. As American generations pass on, race and racism seemingly remain strong more than ever. For better or for worst, young people should learn 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 significant say in preparing future generations of how to best get along with each other while working together to improve America.

#### References

Author (2016). *My schoolhouse is a ghost town: a teacher's story through reform*.  
IN: Authorhouse.

- Author and Murphy, R. (2013). Merging and creating culturally relevant pedagogy in public schools. *Journal of research initiatives*. Vol. 1 (1): 40-46.
- Ahern, M. (Feb. 27, 2012). Emanuel Disavows 25% of School Kids, Says CTU. *NBC News-Chicago*. <http://www.nbcchicago.com/blogs/ward-room/Rahm-Emanuel-Concerned-About-Three-Fourths-of-School-Children-140617923.html>
- Bernal, M (1987). *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic roots of classical civilization (The fabrication of ancient Greece 1785-1985, Volume 1)*. Rutgers University Press, NJ.
- Blassingame, J. (1979). *The slave community: Plantation life in the antebellum south*. Revised & Enlarged edition. Oxford University Press, NY.
- Browder, A. (1989). *From the Browder file: 22 essays on the African American experience (From the Browder file series)*. 10<sup>th</sup> edition. Institute of Karmic Guidance, DC.
- Coats, T. (2015). *Between the world and me*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. Spiegel & Grau, NY.
- Emdin, C. (2016). *For White folks who teach in the hood... and the rest of y'all too: reality pedagogy and urban education*. MA: Beacon Press
- Delpit, L. (2013). "Multiplication is for white people." *Raising expectations for other People's children*, reprint edition. NY: New Press.
- Delpit, L (2006). *Other people's children*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition. NY: New Press.
- Diamond, J. (1999). *Guns, germs, and steel: The fates of human societies*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. W.W. Norton & Company, NY.
- Hernstein, R. & Murray, C. (1996). *Bell curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life (A free press book)*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. Free Press, NY.
- Kellen, A. (Feb. 12, 1998). *Bones Reveal Little Known Tale of New York Slaves*. CNN [http://www.cnn.com/TECH/9802/12/t\\_t/burial.ground/](http://www.cnn.com/TECH/9802/12/t_t/burial.ground/)
- Kohl, H. (1995). *I won't learn from you: and other thoughts on creative maladjustment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. NY: New Press.
- Kozol, J. (2006). *Shame of the nation: the schooling in America*, reprinted edition. NY: Broadway Books.
- Kunjufu, J. (2002). *Black students: middle-class teachers*. Chicago: African American Images.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. CA: Jossey Bass.
- Roberts, R. (2012). *Joe Louis: Hard times man*. Yale University Press, CT.
- Shujja, M. (1994). *Too much schooling, too little education*. NJ: African World Press.
- Segal, C. (Oct. 7, 2014). *Teachers expect less from black and Hispanic students, study shows*. *Nation*. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/teachers-expect-less-students-color-study-shows/>
- Takaki, R. (2008). *A different mirror: A history of multicultural America*. Revised edition. Back Bay Books, NY.
- Takaki, R. (2000). *Iron cages: race and culture in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century America*. Revised edition. Oxford University Press, NY.
- Tatum, B. (2003). "Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria: "And other conversations about race. Basic Books, NY.
- Ventura, C. (July 27, 2016). *Bill O'Reilly: Slaves who built White House were 'well-fed'*. USA News. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitic/2016/07/27/bill-oreilly-michelle-obama-white-house-slaves-speech/87604362/>

