

OPINION

No, It Isn't Racist to Teach Anti-Racism

Tackling white supremacy is good for everyone

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There's a lot of caricaturing of "anti-racist" work going on these days. The state legislature in Iowa (where I grew up) recently passed a bill banning "divisive concepts" in diversity training, including any suggestion that racism is fundamental to our history or society. Idaho, Oklahoma, and Tennessee have passed similar laws targeting anti-racist teaching, with other states poised to follow suit. Parent organizations and politicians around the country are mobilizing against an imagined version of "critical race theory," convinced that anti-racism trainings or K-12 activities vilify white people and teach that "one race or sex is inherently superior to another." These anxieties are replicating nationwide—probably in a community near you.

Are you an educator getting pushback from white critics for what you thought was basic education effort that helped everyone? I'm in your corner. You can tell folks with confidence: Anti-racism trainings and other learning efforts in workplaces or schools actually are designed to teach people that no "race" is superior to another. They don't say white people are inferior. They simply say we're not superior.

You can tell folks: Anti-racist efforts factually explain how the myth that white people are superior is baked into American history (and opportunity patterns and media and curriculum and daily behavior) and still shapes unequal opportunities to learn and feel welcome in schools today. Anti-racism helps us proactively treat all human beings as equally valuable.

In my own books and tools for teachers, I've worked hard to show how throughout U.S. history, "white people" (a social category built on a biological fiction) really have gained disproportionate privilege, wealth, and opportunity from societal racism. I've taught lots of young people these facts, too.

Kids get it: Anti-racism is about leveling the playing field of opportunity, dismantling opportunity barriers, benefiting from the rich diversity of all communities, and treating all people humanely.

It's a pro-human lens.

That's why we can tell critics that anti-racism isn't cruel or divisive or "hateful" or "reverse racist" at all, but a collective investment in an improved society. Through this pro-human lens, white people too can see that the overpolicing killing Black and brown human beings is a human rights problem. We can see that to limit opportunity access for people of color robs the entire shared community of talent and contribution. We can see that if lots more kids get prepped to help cure diseases and innovate improvements to our shared communities, nation, and globe, all our kids get to live in a better society.



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When other kids stay healthier, my child stays healthier. When I experienced a major health emergency, my kids were quite clear how my diverse medical team helped me literally to survive. And crucially, improving schools to support children of color better—to enrich curriculum, ensure challenge, include everyone—actually makes schools better for all.

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When critics balk at the term "white supremacy," I simply remind them that tackling "white supremacy" means critiquing two basic things: 1) the old fiction that "white people" are a "superior" type of person, and 2) centuries of disproportionate opportunity ("white privilege" or "white advantage") organized around that fiction.

Our history curriculum has denied many of us this foundational information. So, in my own anti-racist workshops and books for educators, we go matter-of-factly through these facts. We all need to learn about how Europeans and European Americans used the idea of races to justify slavery and colonialism. Genetically, there are no "racial" subgroups to the human species. European-Americans used the made-up category "white" to legally denote a "type of person" who could get paid for labor and not be enslaved.

(They also wanted poor "whites" to focus on celebrating their new status over "Blacks" instead of seeking better wages from rich white people. This is one major way that racism hurts white people too.)

As European Americans gained legal advantages as "whites"—such as the right to immigrate and become citizens, earn wages, vote, own land, and more—they then wrote more laws to keep those advantages. Laws kept racial categories central to who got which opportunities, creating race-class inequalities of disproportionate white wealth and privilege still with us today. Meanwhile, pseudoscience and media supported false ideas about "white people's" superiority to justify racially unequal distributions of opportunity, bolstering harmful and false ideas about ranked "races" that remain with us today.

This is just accurate history. Shouldn't we learn it? I know lots of white kids who aren't threatened to learn it; they're energized. As adults, we should be just as energized.

Basic history teaching and critical race theory are now being targeted (and distorted) in a strikingly coordinated fashion across the country. You can tell critics that such crucial anti-racist learning about systemic racism shows how unequal opportunity patterns are pervasive in our society, history, and laws. Anti-racist learning about implicit bias helps us see how harmful and false ideas are also buried in our daily interactions, often unintentionally.

In my own professional-development efforts, I focus on how racism is still present in schools in any act or situation that (even unwittingly) treats people of color as less worthy or less complex than white people, or accepts race-class inequalities in opportunity. You can tell folks that anti-racist efforts actually assume participants *are* good people, by asking: Don't you too want opportunity barriers eliminated for all?

When I do anti-racist work in schools, I say explicitly that anti-racism means supporting the full human talent development of every child and *all* groups of children—and pursuing a future where all of us can thrive. Making more opportunities to go around, making more for students least connected to the opportunities that exist, and investing in the future of all children makes our whole community a better place to live.

You can ask folks: Don't you agree?

Finally, you can say that racism hurts white people because it prevents us from uniting with fellow human beings against common foes like public health threats or limited wages or threats to our shared democracy.

So feel confident when you say it: Anti-racist teaching is not racism, partisanship, or propaganda. Martin Luther King Jr. put it simply: Pursuing anti-racism is just trying to “make America what it ought to be.”

All Americans should join this work, not censor it.