



# EMBRACE HISTORICAL TRUTHS

## Embrace historical truths.

Antiracist educators reject incomplete narratives that hide more than they reveal and they are adept at confronting hard histories in the classroom. The curriculum counters dominant narratives by including multiple perspectives and balances stories of oppression with those of agency, resistance, and perseverance. In antiracist schools, students uncover the roots of present-day injustice.

## WHAT IS IT?

It is important for educators to be able to recognize and counter dominant narratives. These are the often-repeated stories that represent a single perspective, that of the dominant social group, and reflect the saying that the victor tells the story. Dominant narratives serve to uphold the culture, beliefs, and power of the majority group by omitting the perspectives, stories, and agency of marginalized groups. They disengage students from marginalized communities and leave all children unprepared to understand the world.

In addition, educators often sugarcoat history by passing over the more difficult parts, rationalizing either that children should not be exposed to the horrors of history or that the

problems they describe are artifacts of the past with no relevance to the future.

Educators who embrace historical truths recognize the “danger of the single story” that so often surfaces in popular culture and in teaching materials. They work to develop the skills not only to recognize the dominant narrative, but to counter and enrich it. They bring multiple perspectives into the classroom and openly discuss past and present injustices as well as the ways people have worked together to correct them. They avoid one-dimensional characterizations of historical figures and groups, including those that cast oppressed people as faceless victims or national leaders as flawless.

## WHY EMBRACE HISTORICAL TRUTHS?

Curricula that sugarcoat history or selectively omit stories of oppression and violence do a disservice to learners. These resources tend to oversimplify the

lives of people in the past as they shy away from complicated stories – especially when it comes to race and racism.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

1 Aldridge, D. P. (2006). The limits of master narratives in history textbooks: An analysis of representations of Martin Luther King, Jr. *Teachers College Record*, 108, 662–686.

2 Brown, K., & Brown, A. (2010). Silenced memories: An examination of the sociocultural knowledge on race and racial violence in official school curriculum. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 43(2), 139-154.

3 Thornhill, T. (2016). Resistance and assent: How racial socialization shapes Black students' experience learning African American history in high school. *Urban Education*, 51(9), 1126-1151.

The failure to embrace historical truths in the classroom does a disservice to all learners and perpetuates historical inequalities. Students who don't experience open and honest dialogue about race and racism in history may enter adulthood with a misguided perception and understanding of society.<sup>4</sup> Inaccurate portrayals and a lack of honest dialogue promote a deficit-centered appraisal of people from non-dominant groups which promotes racialized thinking<sup>5</sup> and sustains racist structures.<sup>6</sup> In turn, when members of non-dominant groups are portrayed negatively, inaccurately, or unfairly, misunderstanding and feelings of disempowerment can fester in classrooms.<sup>7</sup>

Teachers who do not teach the truth risk breaking one of the bonds most essential for all aspects of an effective classroom: trust. Put simply, bonds of trust make schools work at all levels. Student trust in teachers is an important predictor of grades,<sup>8</sup> school persistence and aspiration,<sup>9</sup> and disciplinary outcomes.<sup>10</sup> In turn, trust among adults who work in schools is necessary for school reform and transformation efforts.<sup>11</sup>

Levels of trust, both within and outside of schools, are racialized. People from non-dominant groups generally express lower levels of trust relative to peers from dominant groups.<sup>12</sup> The “trust gap” is largest between Black and white people regardless of their socioeconomic status.<sup>13</sup> Research in New York City has shown that this gap is widespread in schools.<sup>14</sup> This points to a problem that is especially pernicious in education, where the majority-white teaching workforce interacts daily with students who are considerably more heterogeneous.

## HOW DOES IT WORK?

Culturally relevant instruction, where teachers demonstrate good faith and honesty, builds trust with students.<sup>15,16</sup> Teaching historical truths is essential to this work. Learners who feel that their teachers are lying to them (or lied to them in the past) disengage from coursework because they feel disrespected and alienated from school. But when teachers validate the experiences and perspectives of people of color, students are more engaged with their coursework,<sup>17</sup> see improved academic outcomes,<sup>18,19,20</sup> and recall

- 4 Howard, T. (2003). The dis(g)race of the social Studies: The need for racial dialogue in the social studies. In G. Ladson-Billings (Ed.), *Critical Race Theory Perspectives on Social Studies: The Profession, Policies, and Curriculum* (pp.27–43). Information Age Publishing.
- 5 Bell, B. (2020). White dominance in nursing education: A target for anti-racist efforts. *Nursing Inquiry*, 28(1), 1-11.
- 6 Matias, C. E. (2013). Check yo'self before you wreck yo'self and our kids: Counterstories from culturally responsive white teachers?...to culturally responsive white teachers! *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 3(2), 68-81.
- 7 James, W. D. (2018). *Black and white 11th and 12th grade students' perceptions of social studies curricula in New York state public schools*. [Doctoral dissertation, St. John's University].
- 8 Gregory, A., & Ripski, M. (2008). Adolescent Trust. *School Psychology Review*, 37(3), 337–353.
- 9 Romero, L. (2010). *Student Trust: Impacting High School Outcome*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of California Riverside].
- 10 Schneider, B., Judy, J., Ebmeyer, C. M., & Broda, M. (2014). Trust in Elementary and Secondary Urban Schools: A Pathway for Student Success and College Ambition. In D. Van Maele, M. Van Houtte, & P. B. Forsyth (Eds.), *Trust and School Life: The Role of Trust for Learning, Teaching, Leading, and Bridging*. Springer.
- 11 Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- 12 Alesina, A., & La Ferrara, E. (2002). Who trusts others? *Journal of Public Economics* 85(2):207–34.
- 13 Demaris, A., & Yang, R. (1994). Race, alienation, and interpersonal mistrust. *Sociological Spectrum* 14(4):327–49.
- 14 Fox-Williams, B. (2020). *Race matters: Student-teacher trust in New York City middle schools*. [Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University].
- 15 Duncan-Andrade, J. (2007). Gangstas, wankstas, and ridas: Defining, developing, and supporting effective teachers in urban schools. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 20, 617–638.
- 16 Ennis, C. & McCauley, M. (2002) Creating urban classroom communities worthy of trust, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 34(2), 149-172.
- 17 Parkhouse, H., Lu, C., & Massaro, V. (2019). Multicultural education professional development: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(3), 416-458.
- 18 Altschul, I., Oyserman, D., & Bybee, D. (2006). Racial-ethnic identity in mid-adolescence: content and change as predictors of academic achievement. *Child Development*, 77(5), 1155-1169.
- 19 Pérez-Gualdrón, L., & Helms, J. E. (2017). A longitudinal model of school climate, social justice orientation, and academic outcomes among Latina/o students. *Teachers College Record*, 119, 1–37.
- 20 Dee, T. & Penner, E. (2016). *The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum*. CEPA Working Paper No. 16-01. <https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/wp16-01-v201601.pdf>

more information from their history courses.<sup>21</sup> This approach also boosts civic participation – a study of nearly 700 Chicago high school students has shown that critical and relevant instruction bolsters willingness of Latino/a and Black youth to pursue multiple forms of political participation.<sup>22</sup>

Research has sustained the importance of teaching historical truths for all students. White elementary students whose history lessons included information about racism experienced by African Americans demonstrated less bias, stronger valuing of racial fairness, and endorsed more counterstereotypic views of African Americans than students whose lessons omitted information about racism.<sup>23</sup> For Black students, lessons that tell historical truths about racism and Black history boost mental health,<sup>24</sup> school attendance, and feelings of self-efficacy.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, teaching historical truths helps students to develop the tools that they need to interrupt unfairness and build better systems.<sup>26,27</sup> As James Loewen wrote, students must “understand the past” to think effectively about our present and future.<sup>28</sup>

## HOW CAN WE DEVELOP THIS?

Educators need coursework and practice that will enable them to challenge the authority of dominant narratives, ask questions about what texts represent,<sup>29</sup> and identify the “assumptions,

beliefs, ideologies, and concepts embedded in the perspective of the text.”<sup>30</sup> Aronson, Meyers, and Winn (2020) evaluated a critical literacy workshop for pre-service teachers that explicitly introduced counternarratives about common historical topics and figures such as Columbus and slavery. Learners compared those counternarratives to ones presented in popular history texts and were asked to reflect on the differences. The authors found that the participating pre-service teachers showed growth in awareness and commitment to teach more complete stories.<sup>31</sup>

In any grade, teachers can navigate or interrupt “official curriculum” that marginalizes the history of Black Americans. King and Brown studied middle school classrooms and identified several promising practices.<sup>32</sup> These include:

1. Helping learners to identify traditional narratives and respond critically. Teachers can introduce materials such as original historical documents that cover details and perspectives not included in conventional or textbook accounts.
2. Including course content that is relevant to students’ lives. Teachers in their study used music, images, and local history to examine slavery and lynching.
3. Recognizing the diaspora dimensions of the Black experience. Educators should always globalize the Black experience, so that students

21 Martell, C. C. (2014). *Teaching about race in a multicultural setting: Culturally relevant pedagogy and the U.S. history classroom*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Philadelphia, PA.

22 Nelsen, M. (2021). Cultivating youth engagement: Race and the behavioral effects of critical pedagogy. *Political Behavior*, 43, 751-784.

23 Hughes, J., Bigler, R., & Levy, S. (2007). Consequences of learning about historical racism among European American and African American children. *Child Development*, 78(6), 1689-1705.

24 Chapman-Hilliard, C. (2013). *Telling the lion's story: Developing a measure of Black consciousness*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas.]

25 Nelsen, 2021.

26 Roithmyar, D. (2019). Introduction to critical race theory in educational theory and practice. In Parker, L., Dayhle, D., & Villenas, S. (Eds), *Race is...Race Isn't: Critical Race Theory and Qualitative Studies in Education* (pp. 2-6). Taylor & Francis.

27 Muller, M., & Boutte, G. (2019). A framework for helping teachers interrupt oppression in their classrooms. *Journal of Multicultural Education*, 13(6).

28 Loewen, J. (2018). *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New Press, 9.

29 Gainer, J. S., Valdez-Gainer, N., & Kinard, T. (2019). The elementary bubble project: Exploring critical media literacy in a fourth-grade classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(8), 674-683.

30 Bourke, R. T. (2008). First graders and fairy tales: One teacher's action research of critical literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(4), 30.

31 Aronson, B., Meyers, L., & Winn, V. (2020) “Lies My Teacher [Educator] Still Tells:” Using Critical Race Counternarratives to Disrupt Whiteness in Teacher Education, *The Teacher Educator*, 55(3), 300-322.

32 King, L., & Brown, K. (2014). Once a year to be Black: Fighting against typical Black history month pedagogies. *The Negro Educational Review*, 65, 23-43.

learn about African histories and cultures, helping learners to cultivate positive beliefs about Africa.

At the same, curricula and educators' professional development should strive to include the decades of recent scholarship uncovering untold stories of people from marginalized groups that has not made

its way into K-12 classrooms.<sup>33</sup> This will help teachers to elevate unsung histories of creativity, resistance, and resilience. For example, fugitive slave advertisements are records of enslavement placed by enslavers or jailers. But they are so much more - taught properly, they are records of humanity and resistance.<sup>34</sup> Teaching historical truths need not center trauma.

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33 Educating for American Democracy (EAD). 2021. *Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in History and Civics for All Learners*. iCivics, March 2, 2021. [www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org](http://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org).

34 For examples of this practice, see: <https://app.freedomonthemove.org/educators>

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