



RECOGNIZE RACE & RACISM

CARE PRINCIPLE #4:

Recognize race and confront racism. Antiracist educators understand intersectionality and recognize that all individuals are affected by living in a racialized society. The curriculum demystifies difference and demolishes stereotypes, encouraging students to see each other more fully. Confronting racism means explicitly addressing bias, racism, power, privilege, and oppression.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO RECOGNIZE RACE AND CONFRONT RACISM?

Recognizing race and confronting racism begins with understanding the history of the idea of race. There is broad multidisciplinary consensus among scholars that race has no meaningful basis in biology and is a relatively recent idea.¹ An older idea, that of ethnicity, differs from race in a significant way. Ethnic and cultural attributes, like language and food, are learned and can be transmitted, and people can be assimilated into cultural groups. Race, however, based on certain physical features, came to be understood as fixed and immutable.

The idea of race and racial groups began to gain traction about 400 years ago. As Smedley and Smedley write, “Toward the end of the 17th century, race gradually emerged as a term referring to those populations then interacting in North America – Europeans, Africans and Native Americans.”² Efforts

to demonstrate a biological basis for race flourished in the 19th century. In the last 50 years, geneticists have shown that these biological arguments are without basis.

This history reveals that race is a social construct – a human-created idea with no basis in phenotype or genotype. It is precisely because race is socially constructed that all people – including white people – are affected by ideas about race. Because it is socially constructed, race is constantly being invented and deployed in ways both new and familiar. This process, where groups are assigned identities, is called racialization.³

Racialization takes many forms, but one common way is through the repetition of stereotypes in popular culture and social life. The more widely stereotypes are believed, the more likely they are to become institutionalized in public policy, law, and cultural practices.

One form of racism happens when people take actions or institutions make policies based on beliefs about the inherent inequality of a group of people because of their supposedly immutable characteristics. But because racism manifests in behaviors and institutions, it is not only (or even mostly) a matter of slurs

- 1 See e.g., Barbujani, G., Magagni, A., Minch, E., Cavalli-Sforza, L. L. (1997). An apportionment of human DNA diversity. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 94, 4516-4590.; Brown, R., & Armelagos, G. (2001). Apportionment of racial diversity: A review. *Evolutionary Anthropology*, 10(1), 34-40.; Lewontin, R.C. (1972) The apportionment of human diversity. *Evolutionary Biology*, 6, 381-398.
- 2 Smedley, A., & Smedley, B. (2005). Race as biology is fiction, racism as a social problem is real: Anthropological and historical perspectives on the social construction of race. *American Psychologist*, 60(1), 19.
- 3 Omi, M., & and Winant, H. (1986). *Racial Formation in the United States / From the 1960s to the 1980s*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. p. 64.

or personal prejudice – as Schmidt (2005) writes, racism is more than “men in white sheets.”⁴ Racism manifests in society even in the absence of conscious intent; institutionalized and systemic racism is implicated when policies and laws have substantially disparate impacts across racialized groups.

In other words, racism can manifest in policies motivated by biased beliefs, in facially neutral policies with disparate outcomes, and in biased beliefs that are reinforced by observations of these disparate outcomes. This is a vicious cycle.

And racism affects everyone. People of color and Indigenous people suffer the bulk of the consequences of racism, ranging from immediate physical and emotional effects inflicted by incidents of hate and bias to broad, persistent, and profound disparities in educational and vocational attainment, housing, health care, wages, and wealth. A growing body of literature shows that white people also suffer from the consequences of racism, including affective, cognitive, and behavioral costs such as anger, fear, anxiety, guilt, and cognitive distortions, including a lack of awareness of self and others.⁵

WHY RECOGNIZE RACE AND CONFRONT RACISM?

Recognizing race and confronting racism is essential to making schools safe for all learners. According to media reports and educator surveys, expressions of racial hatred are by far the most common of all incidents of hate and bias in schools.⁶ These incidents are deeply traumatic to children in

particular, who can incur substantial and long-lasting damage – including neurobiological and behavioral development⁷ – extending well into adulthood.⁸ An emerging body of research suggests that among young people, even incidents that some consider “normal,” such as teasing or bullying, can have long-lasting effects – especially with repeated exposure.⁹

Both victims and bystanders experience considerable trauma from repetitive and low-level abuse. A study of college students showed that victims had experienced lasting trauma comparable to levels seen in PTSD-diagnosed combat veterans, while bystanders reported effects similar to survivors of natural disasters. In the years following exposure to abuse, victims and bystanders continued to see effects equivalent to those reported by first responders who had experienced a major earthquake.¹⁰

Unfortunately, professional educators are often unaware of the impacts of repeated harassment, especially the effects on bystanders.¹¹ Without conscious intervention, abuse is likely to continue as students conclude that the adults around them condone expressions of hate and bias or simply do not care.

Conscious intervention is also required to address the many ways that racism is institutionalized in schools, including well-documented disparities in discipline, access to advanced curriculum, and teacher expectations. These disparities will not disappear on their own, and many decades of “colorblind” approaches to equity in areas ranging from school funding to gifted designations have failed to remedy racialized disparities.

4 Schmidt, S. L. (2005). More than men in white sheets: Seven concepts critical to the teaching of racism as systemic inequality. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 38*, 110-122.

5 These three dimensions of the costs of racism for White people are reflected in the well-validated Psychosocial Costs of Racism to Whites (PCRW) scale. See Spanierman, L. B., & Heppner, M. J. (2004). Psychosocial Costs of Racism to Whites Scale (PCRW): Construction and initial validation. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 51*, 249–262.

6 Government Accountability Office (2021). K-12 Education: Students' Experiences with Bullying, Hate Speech, Hate Crimes, and Victimization in Schools. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104341>.

7 Bremner, J. D. & Vermetten, E. Stress and development: Behavioral and biological consequences. *Developmental Psychopathology, 13*, 473-489.

8 Janson, G. R. & Hazler, R. J. (2004) Trauma Reactions of Bystanders and Victims to Repetitive Abuse Experiences, *Violence and Victims 19*, 239–255.

9 Garbarino, J. (2001). An ecological perspective on the effects of violence on children. *Journal of Community Psychology, 29*(3), 361–378.

10 Effects were calculated using the Impact of Events Scale – Revised; see: Janson & Hazler, 2004.

11 Hazler, R. J., Miller, D. L., Carney, J. V., & Green, S. (2001). Adult recognition of school bullying situations. *Educational Research, 43*(2), 133–146.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Recognizing race and confronting racism means turning away from “colorblind” or what Mica Pollock has called “colormute”¹² environments that are harmful for educators and learners alike. In experimental interdisciplinary research, “colorblind” approaches have been shown to increase racial anger and fear,¹³ generate prejudice,¹⁴ and reduce empathy¹⁵ among white people. For students of color, “colorblind” approaches increase feelings of self-blame and internalized oppression.¹⁶

Recognizing race and confronting racism in the classroom means teaching about the social construction of race and the processes of racialization that all learners experience. This work must start in early childhood. As Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) have shown, 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children regularly “do racism,” in the sense that they express racialized attitudes including preferring members of their own group and stereotyping others based on ideas about race.¹⁷ These young learners do not simply come up with racist ideas on their own; rather, they pick them up as participants in a racialized society. For this reason, mere counter stereotyping is not enough to root out racism and discrimination. Educators must engage with the larger social contexts and systems institutions that perpetuate racialized inequalities.

12 Pollock, M. (2005). *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School*. Princeton University Press.

13 Neville, H. A., Awad, G. H., Brooks, J. E., Flores, M. P., & Bluemel, J. (2013). Color-blind racial ideology: Theory, training, and measurement implications in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 68(6), 455–466.

14 Richeson, J., & Nussbaum, R. (2004). The impact of multiculturalism versus color-blindness on racial bias. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(3), 417–423.

15 Burkard, A. W., & Knox, S. (2004). Effect of therapist color-blindness on empathy and attributions in cross-cultural counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 51, 387–397.

16 Neville, H. A., Coleman, M. N., Falconer, J. W., & Holmes, D. (2005). Color-blind racial ideology and psychological false consciousness among African Americans. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 31, 27–45.

17 Van Ausdale, D., & Feagin, J. R. (2001). *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism*. Rowman & Littlefield.

18 Milner, H. R. (2012). Beyond a test score: Explaining opportunity gaps in educational practice. *Journal of Black Studies*, 42(6), 693–718.

19 Dee, T., & Penner, E. (2017). The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance: Evidence from an Ethnic Studies Curriculum. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1), 127–166.

HOW CAN WE DEVELOP THIS?

Identify internalized beliefs about race and racialization. Educators should examine their own socialization, beliefs, and behaviors to see whether they reflect internalized messages of racial inferiority and superiority.¹⁸ While unconscious bias is not easily identified, much less removed, this work is still essential. At its heart, recognizing race and confronting racism must begin with recognizing the dignity and humanity of all learners.

Teach about race and racism. In the classroom, it is important to develop curriculum and instructional strategies that explicitly recognize race and discuss racialization and its effects. A growing body of research supports the use of “ethnic studies” courses in this area. These courses have been shown to boost the academic achievement¹⁹ and school engagement of Black and brown students, while diminishing racial animus among white students.

Create safe classrooms for all students. As educators learn to identify the many ways that race and racialization manifest in school contexts, they are more able to interrupt the policies and behaviors that cause harm to students, whether as victims or as bystanders. These behaviors and policies may not stem from a specifically racist “intention,” but be racist in effect. Educators have a responsibility to remove barriers to student success wherever they appear in schools.

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