

United We Learn

Honoring America's Racial and Ethnic Diversity In Education

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Research shows that teaching students about the history and current manifestations of racism has overwhelmingly positive effects for all students. While it's important to address other inequities, such as poverty and disability status, a national debate has erupted about speech codes limiting teachers' ability to teach about race and racism. Teachers need support to improve their practice in this area, but avoiding teaching about race and racism is detrimental to students' learning and healthy development.

Avoiding Discussions of Race and Racism is Unrealistic and Harmful

Developmental Considerations

Infants as young as 9 months show an emerging awareness of race and ethnicity.¹ Preschool children understand social categories—constructs like “red” and “blue” reading groups to those that exist in society, such as gender and race.² It is typical for young children to experience both positive and negative emotions about their ethnic-racial group.³

A recent Children and Racism study commissioned by Sesame Workshop with children ages 6-11 and their parents, found 86% of children think people in the US are treated unfairly based on race. **Nearly half the children surveyed reported that racism was top of mind**, with reports of racism more prevalent in responses of Black children.⁴ When students are aware of negative stereotypes about themselves, it creates stress that reduces their brain's capacity to focus on learning⁵ and undermines achievement from a very young age.⁶

Children develop implicit biases early.⁷ To counter these biases, research points to the importance of providing learning experiences that recognize diversity⁸ and promote empathy⁹, belonging¹⁰, collaboration¹¹, and intellectual curiosity.¹² Specific strategies that state and district leaders can advance include diversifying the teacher workforce¹³ and promoting culturally responsive practices.¹⁴

Many Factors Impact Students' Outcomes

Beliefs about Academic Abilities

Evidence shows that students' beliefs about their academic abilities, or academic identity¹⁵ impact motivation and academic outcomes.¹⁶ Teachers play a vital role. Teachers' expectations have a profound influence on students' beliefs about their academic abilities¹⁷, but are often biased against Black, Latino, and Indigenous students.¹⁸ These biases contribute markedly to achievement disparities.¹⁹

Positive Ethnic-Racial Identity

Understanding identity, broadly speaking, is defined by the answer to the question, “Who am I?”²⁰ One important facet of identity is ethnic-racial identity.²¹ Students with positive ethnic-racial identities have better academic outcomes, health, and overall well-being than those with less positive identities.²² Children with a positive ethnic-racial identity tend to

also have positive attitudes towards those from different ethnic-racial groups.²³ It is important to note that holding negative views of other races/ethnicities, including anti-White views, is related to lower achievement outcomes.²⁴ Schools play an important role in students' development of ethnic-racial identity. Schools can and should affirm and celebrate students' ethnic-racial identity and develop their knowledge and curiosity about others.²⁵

Rigorous research shows that courses that teach the history of race in America improve student outcomes. Examples include ethnic studies courses in Tucson Unified School District and San Francisco Unified School District. Students in grades 9 and 10 in Tucson who completed ethnic studies courses had significantly higher rates of passing the state achievement test and graduation than peers who didn't take those courses.²⁶ In San Francisco, students who took ethnic studies in grade 9 had substantially higher attendance, a higher grade-point average, and more credits than a comparison group²⁷ and follow-up research shows a lasting effect on the likelihood of college enrollment.²⁸

Sense of Belonging

Students' sense of belonging, which involves feelings of acceptance, respect, and inclusion, plays an important role in social-emotional and academic outcomes.²⁹ Having teachers who are caring and supportive is the most important factor contributing to students' sense of belonging.³⁰ Unfortunately, students of color experience less belonging in school.³¹ Outcomes improve for all students when schools foster belonging, including through well-designed academic instruction.³²

The Benefits of Discussing Race and Racism

Schools play an important role in preparing young people to live, work, and thrive in a diverse society. Telling schools to ignore students' awareness of race, racism, and stereotypes leads to increased prejudice.³³ While families are a primary source of ethnic-racial socialization for youth, educators and schools also play a fundamental and influential role.³⁴ Research shows discussing race and racism in school reduces prejudice among White students and students of color.³⁵

Support for Teachers

Despite the evidence supporting classroom experiences that develop students' positive dispositions towards diversity, few educators have acquired the skills to engage in practices that promote positive ethnic-racial identity and reduce prejudice.³⁶ Providing teachers with sustained learning experiences about relevant history, policy, and research reduces educator biases.³⁷ Moreover, engaging educators in professional learning that enables them to activate students' strengths and assets leads to positive outcomes for both teachers and students.³⁸

On the other hand, more research into the effectiveness of anti-bias training for teachers is needed. Current research suggests that interventions focused on White privilege are related to unintended and undesirable results.³⁹ Additionally, most anti-bias trainings involve short, one-shot sessions that do not currently have a strong evidence base in reducing stereotypes and prejudice.⁴⁰

We have important challenges we have to confront as a society, including about race and racism. The research is clear that it is essential to have related conversations in schools and engage in evidence-based practices that reduce bias and promote positive student identities and a strong sense of belonging. Taking these steps will improve teaching and learning and lead to better outcomes for all students. Current debates aren't building on this evidence to enact proven approaches, and jeopardize teaching and learning progress with misguided restrictions. They distract educators from the vital work before them—ensuring every child in America has access to a high-quality public education that can help them realize their full potential and achieve their dreams.

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