

ANTI-RACISM TEACHING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS AND THE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL CONNECTION: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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Abstract

Teaching requires careful attention to the needs of all learners. How do we ensure we consistently meet them holistically? Though we live in what is considered a post-racial society, several injustices are suffered by minority groups. To combat this, many have adopted anti-racist pedagogy. Research suggests, however, that anti-racist teaching should be combined with social-emotional learning to combat negative stereotypes about various minority groups fully. This review of the literature provides insight into how to best combine anti-racist teaching and social-emotional learning for sustained academic success in elementary classrooms.

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Introduction

Teaching requires careful attention to the needs of all learners. How do we ensure we consistently meet them holistically? Though we live in what is considered a post-racial society, several injustices are suffered by minority groups. To combat this, many have adopted anti-racist pedagogy (Abi-Hanna et al., 2022; King & Chandler, 2016). Research suggests, however, that anti-racist teaching should be combined with social-emotional learning to combat negative stereotypes about various minority groups fully (Caven, 2020; Jagers et al., 2018). How can we combine anti-racist teaching and social-emotional learning for sustained academic success in elementary classrooms? As we provide Leadership in a Time of Change, this literature review provides insight into some anti-racism and social-emotional learning research that can be embedded into our practice.

The Origins of Need

The US Education system has experienced many changes over the years as it relates to diversity. From its origin, US schools, known as normal schools, were designed to meet the needs of one demographic: elite White men. In these early education environments, emphasis was placed on teaching the Three Rs – "Reading, Writing and 'Rithmetic'" to their all-White students.

As we currently reside in a post-Plessy vs. Ferguson society, racially integrated classrooms have become the norm in most places. While the faces of the classrooms have changed over the years, the traditional teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic remains static. Though most school systems adequately address the academic needs of the students they are charged to serve, most fail to address the social-emotional needs of these students (NCES, 2022). While some may not necessarily view anti-racist teaching as part of the social-emotional teaching domain, a growing body of research suggests that an intertwined approach allows educators to take "a view that recognizes and values the diverse social and emotional skills students bring to the classroom. Further, it relates students' individual social and emotional struggles to their lived experience with racial injustice and social inequity" (Caven, 2020, para 4.).

Though some educators believe their roles are solely to address the dynamics of social-emotional learning in the classroom, not connecting the social-emotional needs with the lived experiences of children of color may be detrimental to their classroom success (Caven, 2020; Ford, 2020). In some instances, "when Social Emotional Learning professionals and others intentionally or unintentionally adopt a culture-blind philosophy and framework, people of color are being woefully failed and marginalized" (Ford, 2020, para. 6)

How Omission Affects Teachers and Students

As reported in their stance on The Importance of Diversity & Multicultural Awareness in Education, Drexel University School of Education reports that in 2014, "US public schools hit a minority-majority milestone, with Latino, African American, and Asian students surpassing White students" (2021, para. 1). Though this statistic surrounding student demographics indicates a nation progressively moving towards a true mosaic instead of a melting pot, its population of teachers remains unchanged.

The most recent inventory of teachers in US classrooms found that approximately 79% are middle-class and White (Schaeffer, 2021). Moreover, the U.S. Census predicts that over half the nation's population will be people of color by 2024 (Drexel University, 2021). As a result, today's educators should earnestly endeavor to create racially and culturally pluralistic classrooms which affirm students' unique identities.

Confronting and conquering bias and encouraging appreciation for students' differences represent steps towards anti-racism and teaching students the concepts of acceptance and tolerance. Current research indicates that parents' racial socialization, classroom environments, and school curriculums play critical roles in fighting racism, hate, and biases in American Students (Aspen Institute, 2018).

Racism is the belief that groups of humans possess different behavioral traits corresponding to inherited attributes and can be divided based on the superiority of one race over another. Racism and cultural intolerance in American society are prevalent. Beverly Daniel Tatum (2017), a renowned authority on the psychology of racism, in her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, paints a striking example of racial divides in American public schools as she purports, "Walk into any racially mixed high school, and you will see Black, White, and Latino youth clustered in their groups." Is this self-division reflecting what we see in our workplaces, churches, and communities?

While most educators can attest that children are color-blind in pre-elementary and early elementary grades, research by Margaret Hagerman (2018) published in *White Kids: Growing Up with Privilege in a Racially Divided America* suggests children's unintentional social belief systems and values about themselves and others that affect students' attitudes, actions, and choices unconsciously begin to emerge during puberty. However, the onset of racial self-identification, or identifying with a particular aspect of one's racial ancestry, such as skin color, develops between the ages of three and four.

Hagerman (2018) states that limited research exists on racial socialization or how parents communicate racism to their children. This specifically speaks to how White parents talk to their children about race or how parents of children of color prepare their children to thrive within a white supremacist society. As there is a growing hesitancy in some households to address the issues of race, teachers increasingly face the task of addressing stereotype threats, injustices, related trauma, etc.

Drawing on ethnographic interviews with eight affluent White fathers, Hagerman's (2017) subsequent study, *White Racial Socialization: Progressive Fathers on Raising Antiracist Children*, explores White fathers' participation in White racial socialization processes. The article focuses on fathers who identify as *progressive* and examines the relationship between fathers' understandings of what it means to raise an anti-racist child, the explicit and implicit lessons of racial socialization that follow from these understandings, and hegemonic whiteness. Findings illustrate that these men understand their roles as White fathers, how their attempts to raise antiracist children challenge and reinforce hegemonic whiteness, and what role race and class privilege play in this process. In addition to the role of parents in combating racism, Hagerman identifies school and educational institutions as the main drivers of equities and their role in teaching values such as leadership, empathy, social responsibility, democracy, and fairness.

Role as Educators

Losinski (2019) in *Schools as Change Agents in Reducing Bias and Discrimination: Shaping Behaviors and Attitudes* affirms Hagerman's beliefs. Losinski suggests, "Schools can act as change agents to curb youth's negative experiences with discrimination, hateful speech and actions, and harassment." Many schools successfully address these issues by using positive behavioral interventions and supports, social and emotional learning programs, bullying prevention programs, and interventions designed to positively influence discriminatory behavior and biased attitudes. As schools typically are viewed as agents of change, the following: equality, and change policy, emphasizing leadership, empathy, social responsibility, democracy, and fairness should be paramount in the curriculum.

Escayg (2019), author of *Who's Got the Power: A Critical Examination of the Anti-bias Curriculum*, is an anti-racist and anti-colonial scholar committed to fostering Pan-African unity and racial equity in the early years. Escayg—via pedagogy and research—challenges racial and economic injustices affecting Black children and families in the US, Canada, and the Caribbean. Her work defines the anti-bias curriculum as the basis for her comprehensive critique.

Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force (1989) and Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2016) have been widely cited as the pioneers of the anti-bias curriculum. The goals of anti-bias education include the following tenants:

1. Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.
2. Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity, accurate language for human differences, and deep, caring human connections.
3. Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have the language to describe fairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.
4. Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against and/or discriminatory actions. (p. 14)

Educators implement an anti-bias curriculum by creating lesson plans specific to the anti-bias program while also ensuring the curriculum is designed for the early years' classroom. The document contains practical pedagogical advice on implementing all four goals with children between the ages of two and five. However, it is important to note that all learning activities are tailored to the child's cognitive, social, and emotional developmental capabilities (Escayg, 2019). One of the main advantages of the anti-bias curriculum is that it acknowledges children's ability to construct and engage in racialized discourse.

Critics, such as Escayg, of the anti-bias curriculum believe limited attention is paid to the mechanism of White supremacy and a lack of pedagogical strategies to recognize constructive elements of power and privilege in constructing racial differences, including that of whiteness. Additionally, while recognizing class, race, gender, and pluralism on which an anti-bias curriculum is based, it eludes the role of structured and institutional practices in maintaining sharp and inequitable distinctions along racial, gender, and class lines. Furthermore, critics believe the anti-bias curriculum does not provide opportunities for young children to deconstruct the meaning of whiteness.

Albeit parents, school administrators, teachers, and curriculum strategies may not be perfect, they each play a critical role in teaching anti-racism and other forms of bias in elementary classrooms. Fostering inclusion and multicultural and racial awareness in education benefits all students to succeed, encourages acceptance, and helps prepare students to thrive in a diverse world.

Conclusion

To holistically meet the needs of our students, we must be able to employ an arsenal of support for them. Schools and classrooms are more diverse today than ever (Bey, 2019). As such, we must be ready to embrace them on diversity, equity, and inclusion levels. We, as educators, can start by increasing our knowledge in anti-racist teaching and social-emotional learning.

Some ways we can increase our anti-racist and social-emotional pedagogy include confronting and conquering bias and encouraging appreciation for students' differences representing steps towards anti-racism, and teaching students the concepts of acceptance and tolerance. This includes getting to know your students, their families, and their communities. One simple way to gain some knowledge is by having students and their families complete a survey at the beginning of the year that allows them to tell you more about their likes and embed those things into the teaching and learning processes. This will minimize the risk of making stereotypical assumptions and beliefs of a whole group based on limited knowledge.

Another way to increase our anti-racist and social-emotional pedagogy is by educating ourselves on best research-based practices that employ positive behavioral interventions and supports, social and emotional learning programs, bullying prevention programs, and interventions designed to positively influence discriminatory behavior and biased attitudes. The Southern Poverty Law Center provides a starting point for those seeking peer-reviewed, research-based support. One of their publications, *Learning for Justice*, formerly *Teaching Tolerance*, provides "robust, ready-to-use classroom lessons" and professional development opportunities on immigration, bullying, bias, rights and activism, gender and sexual identity, race and ethnicity, religion, etc.

The thought of anti-racist teaching alone can be a difficult topic for some to approach. Nonetheless, through tough conversations—that begin with us—we may be able to effect social-emotional change in the learners we serve. By embedding anti-racist teaching with social-emotional learning techniques, we may provide leadership in a time of change. This may resemble what the late Dr. King, Jr. referred to as a "complete education": one that not only provides students with "power of concentration but [one that provides] worthy objectives upon which to concentrate." This type of "education will, therefore, transmit to one not only the accumulated knowledge of the race but also the accumulated experience of social living" (King, Jr., 1947).

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