

Introduction (A Vignette)

In a bustling sixth-grade classroom, the air grows heavy as Ms. Johnson, a white teacher, shifts the discussion to the Civil Rights Movement. The usual chatter fades into a tense silence, and she notices the students' eyes—especially those of her Black boys—glazing over, their attention slipping away like sand through fingers. Despite her careful crafting of lessons about the lives of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks, hoping to inspire her students, the energy in the room tells a different story.

Marcus, a Black student often caught between brilliance and silence, breaks the quiet with his voice. "Why do we only talk about slavery and civil rights when we discuss Black people? There's more to our history than that." His words hang in the air, weighty and unanswerable. The classroom is engulfed in a charged stillness—this time, one of awakening.

Ms. Johnson's realization is a powerful testament to the role educators play in shaping students' understanding of Black identity. It is a moment of awakening, a realization that the curriculum and the lens through which it is taught needs to change. This moment encapsulates the pervasive anti-Black racism that permeates PK-12 education, but it also underscores the responsibility and motivation of educators to confront these disparities through antiracist pedagogy proactively.

Determined to make a change, Ms. Johnson immerses herself in overhauling her curriculum, her resolve fueled by a deep commitment to affirming her students' full identities. The following week, she introduces stories that resonate with the vibrant energy of contemporary Black innovators, leaders, and artists—figures whose lives stand as testaments to triumph, creativity, and brilliance. These narratives, which extend beyond the familiar tales of oppression, inspire and motivate her students by offering a fuller, richer perspective of Black history and culture.

The transformation in her classroom is immediate and profound. Once subdued and disengaged, Marcus and his peers come alive, their eyes bright with recognition and pride. They eagerly connect these stories to their lived experiences, sparking debates and engaging in meaningful discussions. The classroom hums with renewed vigor, a collective energy that was previously absent.

Ms. Johnson realizes with startling clarity the immense power of the stories we choose to tell—how they can either confine or expand our students' horizons. By perpetuating a one-dimensional narrative,

she contributed to what Adichie (2009) refers to in her TED Talk, The Danger of a Single Story—reducing complex identities to a singular, limiting narrative. Now, she knows it’s time to rewrite the script, telling a story that reflects the breadth of Black Excellence, empowering her students to see themselves as part of history—and architects of the future.

Introduction to Antiracist Pedagogy

This article examines the critical role of antiracist pedagogy in dismantling anti-Black racism in PK-12 classrooms. By reshaping educational practices to spotlight Black Excellence and rigorously challenge systemic biases, educators can cultivate empowering and transformative literacy experiences. Eight foundational pillars of antiracist pedagogy guide this exploration, offering actionable strategies for educators committed to fostering equitable and liberating learning environments. These pillars emphasize the necessity of recognizing and valuing Black voices and experiences, providing a framework for disrupting deeply entrenched harmful narratives.

Stylistic Choices in Racial Discourse

This paper adopts specific capitalization for racial terms to challenge the normalization of whiteness and promote equity and respect in racial discourse. “Black” is capitalized throughout to affirm the cultural and political identities of African Americans and the African diaspora, acknowledging their shared experiences of historical and systemic oppression (Appiah, 2020; Baldwin, 1963). Similarly, “Black Excellence” is capitalized to honor its significance as a transformative framework and cultural ethos that celebrates Black individuals’ achievements, resilience, and contributions. This choice underscores its power as a counternarrative to systemic racism and a catalyst for decolonizing educational spaces (Siddle Walker, 2018; Tate, 2003).

In contrast, “white” is written in lowercase to denote it as a descriptor of skin color rather than a cultural identity (Painter, 2010; Wise, 2010). This intentional stylistic choice aims to decenter whiteness and address the pervasive influence of white supremacy culture and internalized racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; DiAngelo, 2018; Painter, 2010).

Centering Black Students in Antiracist Pedagogy

In the landscape of education, Black students exist at the intersection of systemic oppression and a rich cultural legacy, bringing unique strengths, knowledge, and resilience that enrich the classroom. Their experiences are fundamentally different from those of their peers, making it essential to prioritize Black voices—not just as an option but as a moral imperative. By recognizing their assets—cultural capital,

linguistic diversity, and contributions to social and intellectual movements—we can commit to truth-telling about systemic oppression and challenge harmful narratives. Centering Black experiences allows us to confront inequities head-on while celebrating the brilliance and excellence of Black students. We foster genuinely equitable learning environments by integrating their stories and achievements into our educational practices. This transformation benefits Black students and enriches the entire educational space, creating a more inclusive and just environment for all.

The Urgency of Antiracist Pedagogy

This section emphasizes the urgent need for antiracist pedagogy as a vital tool in dismantling anti-Black racism in classrooms. By revolutionizing educational practices to center Black Excellence and critically interrogate systemic biases, educators must cultivate transformative literacy experiences that empower students to engage with texts critically, connect learning to their lived experiences, and actively challenge societal injustices (Freire, 1970). These experiences enable all learners to thrive intellectually and emotionally. This article advocates for disrupting harmful narratives through practical strategies and reflective teaching practices, calling for the establishment of equitable and liberating learning environments that foster inclusion and celebrate diverse identities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Such environments ensure that every student can become the architect of their future, leading with confidence and purpose.

Defining Core Concepts

- **Transformative Literacy Experiences.** These dynamic experiences transcend traditional reading and writing by fostering critical thinking, self-reflection, and social awareness. By empowering students to connect their literacy skills to real-world issues, transformative literacy reinforces the essential life skill of becoming literate in both the world and the word. It advocates for students' rights to engage meaningfully with texts and contexts that shape their lives.

- **Liberating Learning Environments.** These transformative spaces empower students to feel deeply valued and respected, allowing them to express themselves freely and authentically. Such environments cultivate a profound sense of belonging and community, actively supporting students' academic, personal, and social-emotional well-being.

"In the landscape of education, Black students exist at the intersection of systemic oppression and a rich cultural legacy, bringing unique strengths, knowledge, and resilience that enrich the classroom."

Understanding Anti-Black Racism in Education

Anti-Black Racism is a pervasive and insidious form of discrimination, explicitly targeting Black individuals, deeply rooted in a history of dehumanization, subjugation, and systemic exclusion (Kendi, 2019). Within the landscape of education, this racism manifests in various ways, including the intentional underrepresentation of Black voices and perspectives in curricula, the over-policing and criminalization of Black students (Morris, 2016), and the perpetuation of stereotypes that undermine their intellectual and moral capabilities.

Examples of Anti-Black Racism in Education

- **Curriculum Bias and the Erasure of Black Contributions.** Anti-Black racism in school curricula manifests through an overemphasis on European contributions and the sidelining of Black history, creating a form of curriculum violence against Black students (Cridland-Hughes & King, 2015). Omitting comprehensive representations of Black experiences erases their contributions and undermines their sense of identity and belonging. When Black figures are included, their portrayal is often limited to events like slavery or the Civil Rights Movement, which marginalizes influential individuals such as Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Bayard Rustin, along with contemporary innovators like Dr. Kizzmekia Corbett and Dr. Valerie Thomas. Dr. Corbett played a crucial role in developing the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine as a lead scientist at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), while Dr. Thomas advocated for STEM education for underrepresented groups and invented the illusion transmitter at NASA. This marginalization reinforces reductive views of their identities (Kirkland, 2013). Moreover, failing to acknowledge the rich African heritage prior to settler colonialism and the experiences of American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) perpetuates incomplete and deceptive narratives about Black people and their contributions to the American Empire. By centering Black experiences in the curriculum and promoting diverse narratives, educators can inspire students to see themselves as active contributors and foster an inclusive educational environment that honors and values their rich history.
- **Stereotypes in Classroom Literature.** Many classroom texts reinforce harmful stereotypes about Black individuals, contributing to a distorted understanding of their experiences and identities. Classic literature often depicts Black characters in ways that perpetuate negative traits, such as violence or criminality, or presents overly exaggerated portrayals that lack depth and nuance. This framing can lead students to internalize these stereotypes, negatively influencing their self-perception and peer interactions. For example, characters in some classic novels may be portrayed as one-dimensional villains

or victims, failing to capture the rich complexities of Black experiences. As Bishop (1990) highlights in her work on “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors,” literature should serve as a reflective surface (mirrors) for students of all backgrounds, providing insights into experiences outside their own (windows) and offering opportunities to engage with those experiences (sliding glass doors). A robust literature program should incorporate a variety of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors to ensure that all students see themselves reflected, gain insights into diverse experiences, and engage empathetically with different narratives. However, literature often lacks this diversity, with many students encountering predominantly white characters and stories that do not represent their identities (Phillips, 2024). By critically examining and selecting literature that portrays Black characters with depth and authenticity, educators can create a more accurate and empowering narrative for students, fostering understanding and empathy while challenging harmful stereotypes.

- **Racial Disparities in School Discipline.** Research shows that Black students, particularly Black boys, are disproportionately subjected to punitive measures like suspension and expulsion for behaviors often overlooked when exhibited by their white peers (Morris, 2016; Skiba et al., 2011). For instance, a Black student may face harsh penalties for minor infractions, such as dress code violations or talking back, while a white student might receive only a warning. This inequity contributes to what has been termed the school-to-prison pipeline, wherein Black students are funneled into the criminal justice system for minor infractions (Hirschfield, 2008). Educators can disrupt these racial disparities by implementing restorative justice practices, fostering positive relationships, and promoting equitable disciplinary policies that acknowledge and address racial biases. To effectively recognize and confront these disparities, educators must adopt antiracist stances rather than maintaining policy-neutral positions. By cultivating an inclusive classroom environment that values every student’s voice, teachers can help dismantle the systemic inequities that contribute to these disparities).
- **Misidentification and Marginalization in Special Education.** Black students are often misidentified as needing special education services, contributing to a trend of being marginalized within educational settings. Research by Beth Harry (Harry et al., 2007) indicates that many of these students are misdiagnosed due to cultural biases in evaluation processes. According to research by Fabelo et al. (2011), low-income urban schools often function as holding environments for Black and Brown boys labeled as having behavioral and disciplinary issues, further entrenching systemic inequities. This contributes to what I refer to as the “cradle-to-school-to-prison pipeline,” a term that highlights the systemic issues starting from early childhood—where disparities in access to quality education and

resources persist—through schooling and into the criminal justice system. This pipeline reflects how societal structures fail to support marginalized youth, ultimately leading to their criminalization and disenfranchisement (Wright, 2010). This misidentification can lead to further stigmatization and lower expectations from educators. Black boys are not only marginalized in educational settings; they are criminalized. These patterns of misidentification and marginalization are integral to the perpetuation of anti-Black racism, as they reinforce harmful stereotypes and systemic inequities within educational systems.

- **The Harmful Impact of Classroom Microaggressions.** Microaggressions are subtle, often unintentional slights that perpetuate negative stereotypes about marginalized groups, a term first coined by Chester M. Pierce (1970). Scholars like Derald Wing Sue have expanded this concept, illustrating how comments—such as assuming a Black student is an athlete or questioning their intelligence based on appearance—accumulate to create a hostile educational environment (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These racial indignities not only undermine the confidence of Black students but also create an unsafe learning atmosphere that affects all students. Over time, the cumulative impact of these microaggressions, alongside overt racial indignities—such as direct insults or disrespect based on race—can lead to significant psychological harm, adversely affecting the mental health and academic performance of everyone in the classroom. To combat these issues and cultivate a positive classroom culture, educators must recognize the effects of microaggressions and racial indignities, actively challenge these behaviors, and foster an inclusive environment that values and respects the humanity of all students.

As Kendi (2019) explains, anti-Black racism extends beyond individual biases; it is a systemic issue embedded within the policies and practices of institutions. This systemic nature contributes to the persistence of anti-Black racism across generations, resulting in enduring disparities in educational outcomes and opportunities for Black students. Similarly, hooks (2004) argues that anti-Black racism in education works to dehumanize and marginalize Black students, perpetuating narratives that silence their experiences and limit their potential.

The effects of anti-Black racism on Black students are profound and multifaceted, often detrimentally impacting their academic, emotional, and social well-being. Research indicates that Black students encounter unique challenges in educational settings, including disproportionate disciplinary actions (Gregory et al., 2010; Morris, 2016), lowered expectations from teachers (Ferguson, 2003; Gershenson et al., 2016), and curricula that erase or marginalize Black history and culture (King, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

As Ladson-Billings (1995) argues, Black students are often viewed through a deficit lens, seen as needing trauma-sensitive interventions, while their strengths and assets are overlooked. This cultural disconnect between predominantly white teaching staff and Black students exacerbates the “educational debt,” the cumulative effects of historical, social, economic, and moral inequalities that widen the achievement or opportunity gap. Moreover, Love (2019) asserts that this systemic marginalization creates emotional trauma, leaving Black students feeling alienated and undervalued, which hinders their sense of belonging and ability to thrive in academic spaces. These dynamics not only harm individual students but also undermine efforts to cultivate a liberating learning environment, fostering a classroom culture where equity and inclusivity are challenging to achieve.

To effectively confront anti-Black racism in PK-12 education, educators must commit to antiracist practices that explicitly challenge systemic inequities. This begins with critical self-reflection, where educators examine their biases and how these shape classroom dynamics. I vividly recall transformative experiences in schools where teachers taught with rigor and love, centering marginalized identities in the curriculum. These educators understood the profound effects of race and racism on students’ self-perceptions and lived experiences, empowering Black students and others to connect academic content to their cultural backgrounds.

Educators made learning relevant and relatable by incorporating literature by Black authors and centering Black experiences through discussions of historical figures that reflect students’ identities. This approach enabled students to see themselves in the curriculum and feel valued in their school experiences. They did not just teach us; they ignited our potential as critical thinkers, challenging us to shift the narrative and disrupt the status quo. This is the essence of antiracist pedagogy: creating an educational environment that honors diversity, fosters inclusivity, promotes equity, teaches from a Black-Centered Framework, and empowers all students to thrive.

It is time to shift the script in education toward a more just and equitable system where all students can thrive as their authentic selves. This shift demands both a courageous commitment to antiracist teaching and systems-level accountability in fulfilling the promise of equitable education. Educators must self-reflect and implement strategies that center Black voices and perspectives, ensuring students encounter diverse and truthful representations of Black history. By celebrating the humanity and potential of Black students, we empower all learners to connect academic content with their lived experiences, fostering a more inclusive and transformative learning environment.

Embracing antiracist pedagogy is crucial for disrupting systems of oppression, particularly anti-Black racism and white supremacy. When we combine antiracist pedagogy with purposeful DEI

initiatives, we effectively combat various forms of oppression, including anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, and transphobia in education. Moreover, traditional educational systems must be dismantled and reimaged to serve better Black students and others who have been historically marginalized. As Dr. King stated, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (King, 1994, p. 87). However, educational injustices persist for Black students, who have often been rendered invisible by design in the landscape of education. The time for change is now. Our students deserve an education that uplifts and empowers them while holding the system accountable for equity, justice, and access for all, including equal opportunity.

Table 1

Transforming Classrooms: Eight Pillars for Inclusive Antiracist Education

Pillar	Description	Actionable Strategy	Takeaway
1. Foster Self-Reflection for Empowerment	Self-reflection on personal biases empowers educators to cultivate inclusive and equitable learning environments, enhancing student success.	Mandate ongoing antiracist professional development for staff to promote continuous self-reflection and personal growth.	Empowered educators drive transformative change, improving student outcomes and a more equitable classroom experience.
2. Cultivate Brave Conversations for Equity	Open discussions about race and equity are essential for fostering a supportive and responsive learning community.	Establish brave and accountable spaces for dialogue where all voices are heard and valued.	Courageous conversations deepen understanding and accountability, driving transformative change within educational settings.
3. Build Inclusive Relationships for Student Success	Strengthening connections between schools, families, and communities fosters a holistic understanding of each student, enhancing their educational experience.	Establish meaningful partnerships with families and community members to support student learning and success.	Understanding each student is essential for practical instruction and fostering academic growth.

4. Affirm Diverse Racial and Social Identities	Centering diverse identities, particularly those of Black students, affirms backgrounds and enriches the learning experience.	Activate students' cultural knowledge to enhance classroom learning for all.	Valuing diverse identities fosters a more inclusive community and deepens educational engagement for every student.
5. Foster a Culture of Inclusivity and Belonging	Creating an inclusive environment ensures that every student feels valued and connected within the classroom community.	Employ diverse strategies to promote inclusivity, including differentiated instruction and culturally relevant teaching methods.	Fostering inclusivity and belonging maximizes student engagement and supports academic success for all.
6. Combat Anti-Black Racism through Equitable Design	Combat anti-Black racism by designing curricula and school policies that disrupt systemic inequities and center historically marginalized voices.	Develop and implement curricula that challenge systemic inequities while reflecting diverse perspectives and experiences.	Equitable design enhances school culture and fosters an environment of inclusion and respect for all students.
7. Transform Mindsets	Shifting mindsets around teaching and learning creates a more responsive and equitable educational environment that embraces change and growth.	Promote a growth mindset among educators and students to foster resilience, adaptability, and a commitment to lifelong learning.	Transforming mindsets cultivate a continuous learning and equity culture, preparing all school community members for academic and personal growth.
8. Implement Restorative and Racial Justice Practices	Utilize restorative justice and racial equity practices to address harm, promote healing, and strengthen community bonds within classrooms and schools.	Establish school-wide restorative circles and racial equity practices, focusing on accountability, dialogue, and community building. Address racial disparities in discipline and promote equitable conflict resolution.	Restorative and racial equity practices create an inclusive environment that empowers students to learn from their actions, fostering a culture of respect, inclusion, and racial justice.

Significance of the Pillars

The eight essential pillars of antiracist pedagogy provide a transformative framework for educators committed to fostering equitable and inclusive learning environments. Each pillar represents a commitment to reshaping educational practices and outcomes, ensuring that all students—particularly those from marginalized communities—feel valued, respected, and supported throughout their academic journey.

Understanding the historical context that underpins these pillars is critical. They challenge the dominant narrative that perpetuates the myth of European superiority while acknowledging the rich intellectual heritage of African civilizations. Civilization began in Africa, with the emergence of ancient societies in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, and China around 3500 BCE. Africa is the cradle of humanity and the birthplace of advanced scholarship in mathematics, astronomy, architecture, and governance (Diop, 1987; Mazrui, 1986). By recognizing these contributions, we can dismantle misconceptions and appreciate the profound impact of African civilizations on global history.

A pivotal example of early African scholarship is the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco, founded in 859 CE and recognized as the world's oldest continuously operating educational institution. This institution, along with others like the Sankore Madrasah in Timbuktu, which flourished as a center of African scholarship between the 14th and 16th centuries, attracted scholars from across the globe. By recognizing these institutions as foundational to global scholarship, we dismantle Eurocentric narratives and honor the contributions of all cultures, as they fostered advancements in various fields, disproving the myth of European intellectual superiority (Hunwick, 1999).

Scholars like Mignolo (2011) and Smith (1999) emphasize that decolonial educational approaches, as represented in the pillars of antiracist pedagogy, challenge existing frameworks while validating the identities and experiences of marginalized communities. Understanding these contributions is essential for effectively implementing the pillars, empowering educators to create inclusive curricula that reflect the richness of diverse cultures.

These examples offer a historical foundation for the pillars of antiracist pedagogy. By centering the intellectual heritage of African civilizations, educators can deconstruct Eurocentric frameworks and build a curriculum that affirms the excellence of Black students, inspiring all students to contribute to a more equitable society.

Transformative Action: Unleashing the Power of Antiracist Pedagogy

In the context of the 2024 *MRA Beacon: Journal of Literacy Learning and Research* theme, “The Power of Words: Shining Light on Language Research and Teaching,” language serves as a powerful vehicle for social change. The eight pillars of antiracist pedagogy offer a transformative framework for combating anti-Black racism in PK-12 classrooms, celebrating Black students’ voices and experiences. By integrating a Black-centered curriculum, promoting restorative justice, and engaging in critical reflection, educators empower students to use language that affirms their identities and challenges systemic oppression, ultimately fostering a more just and equitable society.

This transformative action serves as a clarion call for educators to dismantle anti-Black racism. By implementing the eight pillars of antiracist pedagogy (Gorski, 2019; Love, 2019; Okun, 2021), educators can create learning spaces that prioritize Black experiences and reject systems that perpetuate white supremacy. At the heart of this transformation are restorative justice practices rooted in African and Indigenous traditions, which offer paths for healing through community engagement rather than punitive measures. These practices empower educators to address the root causes of conflict, such as the harmful use of racial slurs and bullying, by cultivating empathy and accountability. For instance, I have facilitated restorative circles where students share their experiences in a safe space, fostering understanding, emotional release, and a sense of justice.

By connecting restorative justice to antiracist pedagogy, educators can affirm Black identities and dismantle white supremacy in education (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Winn, 2018). This commitment to transformative action empowers Black students and fosters a culture of equity that benefits all learners (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Noguera, 2003).

Immediate Actions Teachers Can Take

This section outlines transformative strategies educators can implement to actively engage in antiracist pedagogy and dismantle anti-Black racism within their classrooms and school communities. Below is a list of immediate, actionable steps:

- 1. Elevate Black Voices Across the Curriculum.** Incorporate the works and perspectives of Black authors, scholars, and historical figures into lesson plans across all subjects, not just during Black History Month. For instance, in a literature class, analyze *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston (1937) alongside contemporary works by Black authors, allowing students to explore themes of identity and resilience across different periods. Highlighting these diverse narratives enriches students’ understanding

of history, literature, and contemporary issues while affirming Black identities. This approach counters the TED Talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, by Adichie (2009), which illustrates how limited narratives perpetuate stereotypes and marginalize experiences. By facilitating critical discussions around these voices, educators cultivate empathy, cultural competence, and a deeper engagement with systemic inequities and social justice.

2. Facilitate Restorative Justice Circles and Racial Equity Practices. Implement restorative circles alongside racial equity practices to confront harm, cultivate empathy, and promote accountability in your classroom. Safe spaces are essential, but restorative circles demand a culture of shared responsibility and collective healing among all members of the school community. Establishing classroom routines that honor restorative justice and antiracist practices—not just in moments of visible conflict—creates a thriving, supportive environment where every voice matters. For example, after a conflict arises, hold a restorative circle where students discuss the impact of their actions, using guiding questions like, “How did this affect you?” and “What can we do to make it right?” This process, rooted in African and Indigenous traditions, encourages open discussions about racial bias, microaggressions, bullying, and equity issues. By inviting students to share their experiences and perspectives, educators not only strengthen community bonds but also ignite a collective commitment to respect and justice. This proactive approach transforms classrooms into spaces where empathy flourishes, and every student feels valued, ultimately reshaping the narrative around discipline and accountability.

3. Foster Meta-Cognitive Skills for Transformative Action. Commit to ongoing self-reflection by dedicating specific time each week to examine your biases and actively engage in professional development centered on antiracism. Start by building a personal antiracist library—curate a collection of books, articles, and podcasts that resonate with you, such as *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi (2019) or *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain* by Zaretta Hammond (2015).

Share this library with colleagues to encourage them on their learning journeys. Additionally, establish communities of practice by organizing monthly discussion groups where educators can share insights from their readings and experiences. Join affinity spaces

“By inviting students to share their experiences and perspectives, educators not only strengthen community bonds but also ignite a collective commitment to respect and justice.”

focused on antiracist pedagogy and culturally responsive practices, such as online forums or local workshops, to enhance collective learning. For example, facilitate a workshop in your school where participants can discuss strategies for creating inclusive classrooms, encouraging each other to implement new practices. Foster a culture of growth by inviting colleagues to participate in these reflective practices and hold each other accountable for progress. Create a “reflection log” to share with peers, documenting insights and actionable steps toward change. Remember, reflection must translate into transformative action—ensure your insights contribute to dismantling systemic inequities within your educational environment. Let us transform our classrooms into spaces of equity and justice where every student thrives.

- 4. Promote Racial Literacy.** Racial literacy is the ability to understand and articulate how race and racism shape experiences across social, economic, political, and educational domains (Guinier, 2004; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011). It serves as a crucial first step in developing the skills necessary to combat oppressive and racist systems effectively. By providing the language and framework needed to unpack these issues, racial literacy empowers individuals to engage with the complexities of racism. For example, consider the implementation of a “Racial Literacy Toolkit” in schools, which includes vocabulary, discussion prompts, and case studies that help students and educators navigate issues of race and racism (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017). This toolkit enables individuals to articulate their experiences and confront systemic injustices, transforming conversations around race into actionable strategies for change. By equipping our communities with these foundational tools, we can foster a culture of understanding and accountability, paving the way for a more equitable future.
- 5. Foster Courageous Conversations for Creating Schools for Justice.** Establish intentional protocols that ignite bold, unfiltered dialogue around values, identity, culture, race, and justice. These conversations must be grounded in shared agreements—mutually crafted guidelines that ensure psychological safety, respect, and accountability for all participants. Creating such brave spaces compels individuals, particularly those with privileged identities, to lean into discomfort, embrace humility, and engage vulnerably. For example, schools can adopt structured frameworks like *The Compass* (Singleton, 2022), where participants reflect on their emotional, intellectual, moral, and relational responses during discussions. Imagine a high school faculty meeting where educators engage in a courageous conversation about racial bias in discipline policies. Using shared agreements, they openly examine data revealing disparities, reflect on their personal biases, and collaboratively develop action steps to create equitable practices. Such vulnerability fosters understanding, empathy, and a collective commitment to justice—fueling transformative

change throughout the educational ecosystem. By cultivating these courageous conversations, we can create schools that recognize and actively combat systemic injustices.

- 6. Engage Families and Communities.** Strengthen the home-school partnership by connecting with Black families and local community organizations. As the African proverb reminds us, *"It takes a village to raise a child"* (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 15), underscoring our collective responsibility to nurture our youth. Involve the voices and perspectives of families and community members in shaping curricula and classroom culture, ensuring they reflect diverse experiences and needs. For instance, host community forums where families can share their insights and experiences, directly influencing the curriculum design. Create advisory boards composed of parents and community leaders who can collaboratively develop programs that resonate with students' backgrounds. This collaborative approach not only enriches the educational environment but also fosters a profound sense of belonging and support for all students. By prioritizing these connections, we can transform schools into inclusive spaces where every child thrives.
- 7. Incorporate Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices.** Culturally responsive teaching practices involve adapting lesson plans to ensure they are relevant and affirming for all students, particularly Black students. This approach integrates examples, language, and content that reflect students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds while promoting linguistic competence and appreciation for diverse forms of communication. For example, in a history class, educators can incorporate the contributions of Black leaders such as Ella Baker or Fannie Lou Hamer, discussing their roles in the Civil Rights Movement alongside contemporary social justice issues. This not only validates students' experiences but also connects historical struggles to present-day realities. To effectively implement these practices, ongoing professional development and accountability are essential. Educators should seek feedback from peers and students to assess the impact of their teaching. By engaging in this reflective process, educators can cultivate an inclusive curriculum that celebrates diverse identities and profoundly enriches the learning experiences of all students. This transformative approach empowers every learner to thrive in an equitable educational environment.
- 8. Transform Policies to Support Restorative Practices Against Racism.** Advocate for equitable discipline policies to prevent the disproportionate punishment of Black students. Support restorative justice practices that prioritize restoration over punishment. Embrace activism and abolitionist approaches to confront overt and covert racism,

pushing for systemic changes at the policy, instructional, and school climate levels. For instance, consider implementing a school-wide restorative justice program that includes training for staff on conflict resolution and emotional intelligence. This program can replace zero-tolerance policies with restorative circles that address behavioral issues while fostering student understanding and accountability. Remember, do not be bystanders to acts of racism—inactivity colludes with racist outcomes. Actively challenge discriminatory practices by analyzing data to identify inequities and inform strategies for change. By transforming policies and practices, we can create educational environments that are not only just but also nurturing for all students.

9. **Foster a Culture of Growth and Reflection.** Encourage students and staff to view mistakes as opportunities for growth, particularly in discussions about race and bias. Foster a culture of continuous reflection and improvement where conversations about race are normalized and integrated into everyday dialogue rather than being perceived as courageous or daunting. By grounding these discussions in the principles of antiracism and DEI, you cultivate a growth mindset that empowers everyone to engage in meaningful learning and transformation toward justice in schools. For example, regular “Race Talks” should be implemented as part of the school’s routine, where students and staff can gather to discuss current events related to race and social justice in a structured, supportive environment. These sessions can include sharing articles, videos, or personal experiences that encourage open dialogue and allow participants to reflect on their perspectives without fear of judgment. This approach also enables the school community to continue to build racial literacy. Through these immediate actions, educators not only dismantle systemic racism but also pave the way for lasting, meaningful change within their classrooms and school communities. By making discussions about race a regular part of the school culture, we create an environment where everyone feels equipped and encouraged to contribute to the conversation.

Real-Life Applications of Antiracist Pedagogy

To illustrate the practical application of antiracist pedagogy, consider these transformative anecdotes:

Anecdote Example. During a recent professional development workshop, an African American teacher shared her transformative journey of implementing a Black-centered curriculum in her middle-school English class. By integrating literature from Black authors like Toni Morrison and Angie Thomas, she employed culturally responsive practices that deeply resonated with her students.

To create an inclusive environment, she implemented discussion protocols that encouraged every voice to be heard, fostering thought-provoking dialogues on identity, resilience, and systemic injustice. Her instructional approach built academic and racial literacy, helping students connect the literature to their lives and contemporary issues. By incorporating multimedia resources—such as film clips and spoken-word poetry—she made the content relevant and relatable. Additionally, she facilitated identity reflection exercises, prompting students to explore their backgrounds and experiences. This brave space validated their voices, leading one previously silent African American student to express herself through poetry inspired by Sharon Flake’s (2010) *You Don’t Even Know Me*. Her heartfelt reflections on feeling misunderstood resonated with her classmates, demonstrating the transformative power of antiracist pedagogy. Exploring themes of identity and resilience, she observed a significant increase in student engagement. This shift empowered students to share their stories and ignited a collective commitment to social justice. By embracing culturally responsive strategies and cultivating a supportive classroom culture, the teacher-centered diverse experiences illustrate how antiracist practices can profoundly impact student engagement and community building.

Case Study Example. In another instance, restorative justice practices in a Massachusetts high school were integrated into the discipline policy following staff training. The school initiated restorative circles to address conflicts, notably in a case involving a racial slur. Over several weeks, students who were harmed and those who caused harm participated in these circles, engaging in discussions about the emotional and psychological impacts of the incident. Through this collaborative process, students causing harm issued apologies, committed to educating their peers on the effects of racism, and collectively agreed to launch a culture-of-respect campaign. This campaign included the creation of posters, assemblies, and DEI workshops led by faculty and students. Additionally, it prompted an amendment to the student handbook’s antibullying and racial slurs policy. This approach resolved the immediate conflict and ignited a collective commitment among students to foster a more inclusive school culture. This case illustrates how restorative practices can transform relationships and build a stronger community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, dismantling anti-Black racism in education is an urgent and moral imperative. Educators hold the power to create inclusive spaces that elevate Black voices and affirm diverse identities. Importantly, we must recognize that Black Excellence is not a zero-sum game; it enriches the educational experience for all students, fostering a culture of high expectations and mutual respect. As McGhee (2021) explains, the zero-sum fallacy—the belief that gains for one group come at the expense of another—has perpetuated racial inequities. By addressing systemic injustices, we create benefits that ripple across entire communities. When we uplift Black students, we cultivate an environment where

every learner can thrive, ultimately benefiting the entire school community (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

By actively engaging with the eight pillars of antiracist pedagogy and committing to transformative action, we can redesign classrooms and ignite a broader movement for equity and justice. Educational reform is not just outdated; it is fundamentally inadequate and complicit in a system designed to perpetuate racial and economic inequities. It has failed to align with the urgent need for a transformative educational framework that dismantles the very structures of oppression it claims to address. Actual progress requires the bold decolonization of our education systems, demanding courageous actions and accountability from all of us. While the challenges are significant, the potential for lasting change is profound and underscores our duty to advocate for a future where every student feels valued and empowered. Now is the time to act—let us commit to this vital cause and pave the way for future generations of abolitionist transformers.

References

- Adichie, C. N. (2009, October 7). *The danger of a single story* [Video]. TED. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg>
- African Proverb. (n.d.). *It takes a village to raise a child*.
- Appiah, K. A. (2020). *The lies that bind: Rethinking identity*. Liveright.
- Baldwin, J. (1963). *The fire next time*. Dial Press.
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). *Reflections on the need for the multicultural literature in our schools*. In J. A. Banks & C. A. M. Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (pp. 140-149). Wiley.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2018). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America* (5th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cridland-Hughes, S. A., & King, L. J. (2015). Killing me softly: How violence comes from the curriculum we teach. In *The Assault on Communities of Color: Exploring the Realities of Race-Based Violence* (pp. 99-102). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine the future*. Teacher's College Press.
- DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.
- Evans, K., & Vaandering, D. (2016). *The little book of restorative justice in education: Fostering responsibility, healing, and hope in schools*. Good Books.
- Fabelo et al., (2011). *Breaking schools' rules: A statewide study of how school discipline relates to students' success and juvenile justice involvement*. Council of State Governments Justice Center. <https://csgjusticecenter.org/resources/breaking-schools-rules>
- Ferguson, R. F. (2003). Teachers' perceptions and expectations and the Black-White test score gap. *Urban Education*, 38(4), 460-507. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085903038004006>
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum.

- Galloway, M. K., & Ishimaru, A. M. (2017). Equitable leadership on the ground: Confronting the "illusion of inclusion" in school leadership teams. *Journal of School Leadership*, 27(4), 511–538.
- Gershenson, S., Holt, S. B., & Papageorge, N. W. (2016). Who believes in me? The effect of student–teacher demographic match on teacher expectations. *Economics of Education Review*, 52, 209–224. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2016.03.002>
- Gorski, P. C. (2019). *Avoiding racial equity detours*. EdChange. Retrieved from <http://www.edchange.org/publications/Avoiding-Racial-Equity-Detours-Gorski.pdf>
- Gregory, A., Skiba, R. J., & Noguera, P. A. (2010). The achievement gap and the discipline gap: Two sides of the same coin? *Educational Researcher*, 39(1), 59–68. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X09357621>
- Guinier, L. (2004). *The miner's canary: Enlisting race, resisting power, transforming democracy*. Harvard University Press.
- Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain*. ASCD Development Series.
- Harry, B., Klingner, J. K., & Cramer, E. (2007). *Case studies of minority student placement in special education*. Teachers College Press.
- Hirschfield, P. J. (2008). Preparing for prison? The criminalization of school discipline in the USA. *Theoretical Criminology*, 12(1), 79–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480607085795>
- hooks, b. (2004). *We real cool: Black men and masculinity*. Routledge.
- Hunwick, J. (1999). The role of the Sankore Madrasah in the transmission of knowledge in medieval West Africa. In *The Islamic World: Past and Present* (pp. 113–125). Oxford University Press.
- Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. One World.
- King, J. E. (2017). Dysconscious racism: Ideology, identity, and the miseducation of teachers. In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (2nd ed., pp. 128–140). Routledge.
- King, M. L. (1994). *Why We Can't Wait*. Harper Perennial.
- Kirkland, D. E. (2013). Ain't I a teacher? Reflections on Black teachers and teaching. In M. E. McClure & K. L. Stokes (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice: A handbook for educators* (pp. 33–50). Routledge.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465>
- Love, B. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon Press.
- McGhee, H. (2021). *The sum of us: What racism costs everyone and how we can prosper together*. One World.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2011). The dark side of the renaissance: Global capitalism and the colonality of power. In R. E. C. P. S. W. D. Mignolo (Ed.), *The dark side of the renaissance: Global capitalism and the colonality of power* (pp. 29–54). Duke University Press.
- Morris, M. W. (2016). *Pushout: The criminalization of Black girls in schools*. The New Press.
- Noguera, P. A. (Autumn, 2003). Schools, prisons, and social implications of punishment: Rethinking disciplinary practices. *Classroom Management in a Diverse School*, 42(4), 341–350.
- Nussbaum, S. (2010). *It takes a village: And other lessons children teach us*. Random House.
- Okun, T. (2021). *The characteristics of White supremacy culture*. Dismantling Racism Works.
- Painter, N. I. (2010). *The history of white people*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Phillips, A. (2024). *The diversity gap in literature: Addressing the narrative we tell*. Academic Press.

- Pierce, C. M. (1970). Offensive mechanisms. In F. B. Barbour (Ed.), *The Black seventies* (pp. 265–282). Porter Sargent.
- Sealey-Ruiz, Y. (2011). The use of educational documentaries in urban teacher education: A case study of The Bronx Princess. *Journal of Negro Education*, 80(2), 131–146.
- Siddle Walker, V. (2018). *The lost education of the Negro: Reclaiming Black excellence in the classroom*. Harvard Education Press.
- Singleton, G. E. (2022). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools and beyond* (3rd ed.). Corwin.
- Skiba, R. J., Arredondo, M. I., & Rausch, M. K. (2011). *Zero tolerance, suspension, and expulsion: Questions of equity and effectiveness*. Policy Research Brief. Indiana University, Center for Evaluation and Education Policy.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books.
- Solorzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800103>
- Tate, W. F. (2003). Critical race theory and education: History, theory, and implications. *Review of Research in Education*, 22(1), 195–247. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X022001195>
- Winn, M. T. (2018). *Justice on both sides: Transforming education through restorative justice*. Harvard Education Press.
- Wise, T. J. (2010). *Colorblind: The rise of post-racial politics and the retreat from racial equity*. City Lights Publishers.
- Wright, W. E. (2010). *Foundations for teaching English language learners: Research, theory, policy, and practice* (2nd ed.). Caslon Publishing.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE CITED

- Flake, S. (2010). *You don't even know me*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
- Hurston, Z. N. (1937). *Their eyes are watching God*. HarperCollins.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darnell T. Williams is a critical educator, transformative leader, and dedicated education activist with over 25 years of experience centering Black Excellence in education. As the Founder and Executive Director of DTW Equity Consulting, LLC, he spearheads initiatives to decolonize Eurocentric values and promote antiracist practices in schools. Based in Massachusetts, Darnell empowers educational institutions to cultivate racially equitable learning environments.