

Introduction: Defining Everyday Antiracism

Everyday things represent the most overlooked knowledge.

—Don DeLillo, 1997

To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle.

—George Orwell, 1946

For this book, I invited over sixty researchers, many of whom are former teachers, to boil down their school-based research into knowledge usable for K–12 classroom practice. I wanted each author to suggest a school-based action educators could take, every day, to help counteract racial inequality and racism in schools and society. We call these actions *everyday antiracism*.

This book is not designed to convince you that you intentionally harm children. Instead, it is designed to get you thinking about how everyday actions can harm children unintentionally. It is not designed to get you to ask, “Am I a bad person?” Instead, it is designed to get you to ask, “Do my everyday acts help promote a more equitable society?”

We collectively define “racism” as any act that, even unwittingly, tolerates, accepts, or reinforces racially unequal opportunities for children to learn and thrive; allows racial inequalities in opportunity as if they are normal and acceptable; or treats people of color as less worthy or less complex than “white” people. Many such acts taken in educational settings harm children of color, or privilege and value some children or communities over others in racial terms, without educators meaning to do this at all. That is why this book zooms in on ordinary acts taken by educators on a daily basis, and focuses proactively on suggestions for everyday *antiracism*. We not only show what acts inside schools and classrooms perpetuate racial inequalities, but we suggest alternative acts that can help to dismantle such inequalities instead.

Educational policies and “outside” realities of health care, housing, and family employment have huge effects on the opportunities the children in our schools need and receive. Stereotypes and inaccuracies about “race groups” circulate in society at large. But inside schools, everyday acts matter, too. In schools, people interact across racial lines, distribute opportunities moment to moment, react to “outside” opportunity structures, and shape how future generations think about difference and equality. Interactions in educational

settings help build or dismantle racial "achievement gaps." To a student, one action can change everything. Everyday acts explored in this book include how we talk with our students and discipline them; the activities we set up for them to do; the ways we frame and discuss communities in our curriculum; and the ways we assign students to groups, grade their papers, interact with their parents, and envision their futures. Few of the contributors to this book see such actions as "small potatoes" efforts. Rather, we propose that such antiracist work helps remake social structure one bit at a time.

I acknowledge that the word "antiracism" can have a negative cast, for it implies that the educator is constantly fighting against and reacting to racial inequality, rather than struggling more positively and proactively to equalize opportunity and create an egalitarian society. It also can be heard as suggesting that some *people* are "racist" and others are not. Yet this book frames dismantling racial inequality and pursuing racial equality as two sides of the same collaborative undertaking. It also sets forth to counteract racial inequality and racism in society, not just inside "bad people." The word "everyday" is also crucial: it suggests that educators can, and must, help counter racial inequality and racism in society at routine moments of the schooling experience.

Pursuing racially equal opportunity and counteracting racism on a daily basis in our classrooms and schools requires more than being a great teacher of a subject; it requires particularly hard thinking about our choices in complex situations. In a society where racism and racial inequality already exist, it is often hard to figure out which of our everyday activities are harmful to students or others and which are helpful to them. Blanket advice to "be colorblind" regarding our students, to "celebrate" their or others' diversity, or to "recognize" their "race" and our own is not that helpful in real life. In daily life, sometimes educators' being colorblind is quite harmful to young people, since they live in a world that often treats them racially; sometimes a particular celebration of diversity can be reductive and stereotypic; sometimes seeing a person primarily as a member of a "race" detracts from recognizing our common humanity.

Antiracist educators must constantly negotiate between two antiracist impulses in deciding their everyday behaviors toward students: they must choose between the antiracist impulse to treat all people as human beings rather than racial group members, and the antiracist impulse to recognize people's real experiences as racial group members in order to assist them, understand their situation better, and treat them equitably. I ask the reader to keep a basic question in mind throughout the book. In your practice, when does treating people as racial group members help them, and when does it harm them? This core question ties this book together. Academics who write about racism and antiracism in education often neglect to answer, or even consider, this basic question. But in a world that has been organized for six centuries around bogus

biological categories invented in order to justify the unequal distribution of life's necessities, some antiracist activity refuses to categorize people racially. Other antiracist activity recognizes people living as racial group members in order to analyze and transform a racially unequal world.

In countless daily ways, teachers, administrators, and program directors hoping to protect and assist young people must decide which acts counteract racial inequality. This involves deciding whether and how to see, treat, or talk about students, parents, colleagues, or others in racial terms. Some ways of recognizing students as "black" buoy them up with confidence; others trap them in reductive or stigmatizing notions of what being "black" means. Many colleagues may not consider it relevant that they or their students are "white"; yet ignoring their lived experience as "white" people can miss a major dimension of their reality. Some ways of framing students as "Latino" make Latino students feel welcome and safe; others make them feel excluded or likely to fail. Some framings in curriculum of parents as "Asian" or a community as "Indian" can be deeply inaccurate, yet ignoring people's experiences as "Asians" and "Indians" can prevent recognition of their struggles and joys. Specific ways of highlighting or downplaying our own racial-ethnic experiences or identities in conversations with students or colleagues can be dangerous or useful.

Really, everyday antiracism requires both addressing people's experiences in the world as racial group members and refusing to distort people's experiences, thoughts, or abilities by seeing them only or falsely through a racial lens. This applies when educators interact with students in classrooms, design and discuss curriculum, interact with students' families, or even think about ourselves and our colleagues. Educators must analyze, concretely, *when*, *where*, and *how* it helps to treat people as racial group members, and when, where, and how it harms. Above all, educators must keep analyzing which of our everyday actions counteract racial inequality and which do not.

All of us, then, suggest specific, concrete ways educators can help equalize students' academic and social opportunities to learn and thrive in K-12 educational settings, and more generally combat racism and racial inequality from within schools and classrooms. We differ in the methods we suggest to move in that direction. Some of the authors here measure "helping" as getting students to achieve higher test scores; others measure "helping" as getting students to believe in their own potential to become scientists. Some measure "harming" as actions that cause students to doubt their abilities, to lower their career aspirations, or even to despise themselves or others. Some authors analyze the treatment of students of color in particular; many essays' recommendations can apply to schools and classrooms of any demographic composition. Educators with a range of personal styles, in a variety of school situations, will find different suggestions useful and compelling.

These essays focus on things to do in our schools and classrooms, rather than just on ways to think differently about ourselves or others. Antiracist

practice requires the intermingling of actions and ideas. The contributors recognize that being effective at countering racism and racial inequality requires us to develop skills as well as commitment. Many educators say they enter the field seeking to improve opportunities for all children but end up either frustrated or failing at this task because they cannot figure out how to navigate race issues while doing this. So, each essay in the book asks educators to rethink their ordinary activities and to try doing something differently in everyday life. I asked each author to boil her or his recommendation down to one sentence that I have used in the introduction to each section, forcing us all to pinpoint strategies and principles of everyday antiracism.

We assume that readers are committed to helping children to learn and thrive. We do not assume that readers will accept or agree with our analyses of how the everyday acts discussed here might help equalize opportunity for children, or combat racism and racial inequality in society. I asked each author to support each of his or her claims with research and personal experience. I also asked each author to clarify claims about "race" and "racism." Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I asked each author to walk the educator through the minefields or pitfalls educators might encounter if they take his or her advice. Educators work in a world of ever-changing complexity; we expect that readers will modify and rework these ideas for their own purposes and contexts.

In "Suggestions for Using This Book," I suggest that as you read and discuss these essays, you seek to name antiracist *principles*: core ideas about how to pursue racially equal opportunity and counteract racism from within schools and classrooms. To get us started, let me propose four foundational principles. Everyday antiracism in education involves

- Rejecting false notions of human difference;
- Acknowledging lived experiences shaped along racial lines;
- Learning from diverse forms of knowledge and experience; and
- Challenging systems of racial inequality.

First, everyday antiracism in education involves rejecting false notions of human difference and actively treating people as equally worthy, complicated, and capable. In educational settings, antiracism entails actively affirming that no racially defined group is more or less intelligent than any other. We can tell students that racial categories have no valid genetic basis. Through our curriculum and in our everyday interactions, we can challenge oversimplified notions about racial-ethnic identities or group behaviors. We can remember that any "race" group is composed of individuals who have complicated identities and lives.

Second, everyday antiracism in education involves acknowledging and engaging lived experiences that do vary along racial lines. Genetically bogus racial categories like “white,” “black,” and “Asian” were built upon genetically insignificant physical differences (hair, noses, and bone structures). Racialized categories like “Latino,” “Native American,” and “Arab” lump together people from countless regions and, in some cases, people who speak totally different languages. Still, over six centuries of American history and even now, people have been lumped into ranked “races” by others and forged solidarity along racial-ethnic lines themselves as a means of social empowerment. The Irish “became white” in the nineteenth century, and Jews “became white” in the twentieth, to gain opportunity in a system that already favored “whites” of European descent. Lumped together as a “race” to be enslaved by “whites,” Africans and their descendants in America simultaneously forged deep solidarity as “black” people. People from a variety of Asian origins made alliances as “Asian Americans” starting in the 1960s. “Latinos” converged at that time as well, voicing the plurality of their origins and the unity of their agendas. Distinct tribes of Native Americans recognized common experiences of displacement and forced assimilation. “Arabs” have shared many U.S.-based experiences, particularly in recent years. All such “racial” groups in the United States today bring different historic and contemporary experiences to the table, and after several centuries of opportunities being distributed differentially along racial lines, racial group members still have differential access to educational resources and opportunities for success. Everyday antiracism entails engaging our own and one another’s experiences *as* racial group members—particularly of this differential treatment, whether we have benefited from it or been sabotaged by it.

Third, everyday antiracism in education involves learning from diversity in human experience, and valuing equally the knowledge and activity shared within various “groups.” As Cornel West wrote, for example, being “black” today can involve both experiencing stigmatization, particularly from “whites,” and enjoying a community that has bonded through expressive practices and political resistance in the midst of oppression.¹ Respecting such shared experiences and knowledge also involves appreciating the critical lenses that members of groups can offer—even as we highlight the diversity within groups and emphasize each person’s individuality.

Fourth, everyday antiracism in education involves equipping ourselves and others to challenge racial inequalities of opportunity and outcome, rather than accepting racial disparities as normal. We can clarify the ways in which educational and life opportunities are still unequal along racial lines; we can help equip students, parents, ourselves, and our colleagues to analyze and demand the opportunities each child needs and deserves. We can ensure that within our own schools and classrooms, necessary opportunities to learn and thrive are provided, and distributed equitably; every day, we can try to help level the

playing field of opportunity. Children and youth need to come to understand that they are disadvantaged or privileged by a social system that they, like educators, can help make more equitable.

These four principles are not self-contradictory. Rejecting false notions of human difference, engaging lived experiences shaped along racial lines, learning from diversity in human experience, and challenging systems of racial inequality can all happen simultaneously, and each can be emphasized in particular situations. Antiracism requires not treating people as racial group members when that is harmful, and recognizing them as racial group members when that helps people to analyze life experiences and equalize opportunity. Deciding which move to take and when requires thinking hard about everyday life in educational settings. These choices are complex, anxiety-ridden, and deeply consequential. That is why we wanted to prompt analysis of everyday actions in schools, to help educators consider how their own actions might help dismantle racial inequality.

We urge readers to hone our proposed strategies for use in their own schools, to critique these strategies, and to brainstorm and experiment with new strategies along with students, parents, and colleagues. We hope you will make the most of this chance to “zoom in” and think deeply about the potential consequences of your daily practice.

Note: Hundreds of thinkers contributed to the ideas proposed in this book; their work is gathered in the reference list. Three authors in particular helped shape this book's specific concept of “everyday antiracism” in education. Philomena Essed first framed “everyday racism” as the re-creation of “structures of racial and ethnic inequality through situated practices” normalized in everyday life (see 2002, 18). Michèle Lamont first adopted the phrase “everyday antiracism,” for her work on the ideas people in different countries employ to challenge racist notions about the relative worth of various groups (and what makes these groups unequal) (2000a and 2000b). In my work, I share the phrase to refer to everyday actions challenging racism and racial inequality in the educational domain. See also Jane Mansbridge (e.g., Mansbridge and Flaster 2007), who coined the analogous term “everyday feminism.”