
[A future we can all live with: How education can address and eradicate racism](#)

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Social barriers to education

Global citizenship education

Prejudice is a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future, and renders the present inaccessible. - Maya Angelou

These words spoken by Maya Angelou more than 30 years ago echo the injustices of the past, add gravitas to our turbulent present and show clearly that prejudice runs counter to what is needed, at the core, for us to become global citizens who promote and develop just and peaceful futures.

Today, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic that has exposed stark socio-economic inequalities and exacerbated hate speech, the world is also witnessing a global uprising against systemic, institutionalized and structural racism and discrimination. Protests are unfolding in nearly every continent – from North and South America to Europe and Australia. This is not only about yet one more senseless killing of an unarmed African-American man. It is about the senseless killing of millions over many centuries, the unequal and unjust treatment, the different forms of violence, the economic and social inequality, the lack of opportunity, the racial profiling, the marginalization, the micro-aggressions and the countless daily indignities.

Systemic racism and discrimination are rooted in the structure of society itself, in governments, the workplace, courts, police and education institutions. Racism can be explicit but often exists in implicit, subtle and insidious forms that can be hard to pin down.

Global data on education points to the malignancy of racism:

School disciplinary policies disproportionately impact Black students. In some settings, starting as early as preschool, Black children are 3.6 times more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions than White children, increasing to 4 times as likely in grades K-12. Black students are also more than twice as likely to face school-related arrests and be referred to law enforcement ([US Department](#)

[Office for Civil Rights, 2016](#); [Fabello et al., 2011](#)).

Teachers' expectations differ by students' race. Many studies have found a correlation between teachers' expectations and students' educational outcomes including academic achievement and completion of higher education ([Boser et al., 2014](#)). However, teachers' expectations differ by students' race, economic status and national origin. For instance, Eastern European students have experienced various forms of racism and low expectations in the UK school system ([Tereschenko et al., 2018](#)).

Students from ethnic and racial minority groups are more likely to be labelled 'at risk'. For example, in Quebec, Canada, students with Caribbean backgrounds are three times more likely to be identified as SHSMLD (students with handicaps, social maladjustments, or learning difficulties) and placed in separate classes for "at-risk" students ([Maynard, 2017](#)).

Education attendance and attainment correlate with race. According to the [2020 Global Education Monitoring Report](#), although there have been advances towards increasing access in recent decades, enduring racial inequality remains in educational attendance and attainment in Latin American countries. For example, compared to their non-Afrodescendant peers, attendance rates are lower for Afrodescendants aged 12-17 ([ECLAC, 2019](#)). Based on World Bank data ([2018](#)), Afrodescendants in Uruguay and Peru are also reported as less likely to complete secondary school than non-Afrodescendants.

Racial discrimination takes place among students. In Australia, a study of primary and secondary Anglo-Celtic/European, East or Southeast Asian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander and African students' backgrounds, found that one in three reported being the victim of racial discrimination by their peers ([Priest et al., 2019](#)).

The returns to education differ by race. In post-Apartheid South Africa, although opportunities for education have improved, there has been a divergence in the valuation of that education. In 2004, differences in the returns to education accounted for about 40% of the White-African wage differential ([Keswell, 2010](#)). By 2018, the average Black South African earned five times less than the average White South-African ([Syed & Ozbilgin, 2019](#)).

Racism is a violation of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (1948) and it goes against UNESCO's [Convention Against Discrimination in Education](#) (1960), the [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#) (1965), the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (1966) and the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (1989).

Systemic racism and discrimination are rooted in the structure of society itself, in governments, workplaces, courts, police and education institutions.

Education systems and educational institutions have an important role and responsibility in addressing and eliminating racism through:

Supporting schools to implement education policies that support racially integrated schools. Such schools have been found to promote greater social cohesion and cross-race relationships ([Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011](#)).

Training and recruiting teachers that reflect the diversity of students. Studies show that when teachers reflect the student body, there are improved learning outcomes, higher expectations and fewer disciplinary actions ([Egamit et al. 2015](#)).

Examining the curriculum from multiple vantage points. First, schools should give history, social memory and human rights – as well as indigenous forms of knowledge – a place at the core of teaching. This helps us to fully understand the past and its relation to the present and to break the perpetuation of stereotypes. Second, educators should reexamine and revise curriculum, and textbooks in particular, to eliminate racist depictions, misrepresentation, and historical exclusions.

Addressing implicit bias. All actors in education institutions from policy-makers, leaders, teachers, staff and students should receive training to become aware of their implicit bias – their unconscious bias and beliefs. Reflective teaching, fair discipline policies based on data and use of external feedback are some strategies schools can use to reduce implicit bias ([Staats, 2015](#)).

The injustice of systemic racism is a significant barrier to the type of education that is needed for preferred alternative futures for all - for a world where people are able to live together peacefully as global citizens in strong and just societies that value diversity. As educators, citizens and as a global community, we have much work to do to ensure that the solutions proposed to defeat systemic racism do not remain mired in the system that is being critiqued, so that the roots of oppression and inequality can be removed.

And for that, a frank and bold approach is needed as affirmed in the recent message from the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, “The position of the United Nations on racism is crystal clear: this scourge violates the United Nations Charter and debases our core values. Every day, in our work across the world, we strive to do our part to promote inclusion, justice, dignity and combat racism in all its manifestations.”

It is time for essential conversations and inspired and informed action.

Our future depends on it.

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