

Statement Acknowledging the Centrality of Racism in the United States

Center for Equity and Justice in Teacher Education, Georgia State University
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Enacting social justice-oriented and equity-centered education and professional development has consistently faced challenges including mandated curriculum that centers experiences of white people, excludes narratives of resistance by marginalized groups, and normalizes white culture and ways of being; biased high-stakes testing and standards focused on skill over critical consciousness development; and opposition from individuals and organizations who want to maintain the status quo in education because the system benefits them. Yet now we face a new challenge: on September 22, 2020, [an executive order](#) was issued that positions anti-racist education as racist. As a collective of scholars and teacher educators committed to striving for equity and justice in education, we proclaim that this executive order is built on misinformation and historical inaccuracies. We address two major inaccuracies, focusing on race.

We first respond to perhaps the foundational misconception in the executive order, upon which other misstatements, inaccuracies, and misconceptions are based throughout the remainder of executive order. The executive order presents the statement in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” as the foundational belief of the United States while presenting as divisive and untrue the concept of recognizing that “The United States is fundamentally racist or sexist.”

The statement “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence was written when slavery existed in the states, creating a contradiction between this stated belief and actual practices at the time. As a center focused on equity and justice, we commend the belief and work towards realizing a goal of equitable treatment of all peoples regardless of race or gender identity. Yet we cannot ignore the racist and cruel institution of slavery that was a prominent feature of the United States from its beginning.

In 1852, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who had formerly been enslaved, powerfully illustrated the contradiction between American rhetoric of freedom and the continued enslavement of Black peoples. Speaking to the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society in Rochester, New York, Douglass questioned:

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.... your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity,

are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy — a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.

That slavery existed when the United States of America was founded in 1776 is a fact. That it continued to exist until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 is also fact. The enslavement of Black peoples was based on a racist belief in the inferiority of darker-skinned races. Denying these truths is divisive and anti-American.

We also cannot ignore the continued legacy of racism in the United States. Extensive research demonstrates discrimination against people of color seeking housing (e.g. *The Color of the Law*, Richard Rothstein), in the U.S. judicial system and prisons (e.g. *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson; *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander), in our public school systems (e.g. *High Stakes Education*, Pauline Lipman), and in their interactions with police (e.g. *Invisible No More*, Andrea J. Ritchie).

To deny these established facts regarding this nation's racist history and present moment is anti-American. To face these, *reckon with them*, is to move towards equity and justice. This is work the nation needs.

Related to the origins of this country, we address the statement presented as a divisive concept in the executive order that “members of one race or sex cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect to race or sex,” which in simpler terms means being aware of and acknowledging racial and gender differences. We agree that one should not make an assumption about who a person is based on the color of their skin or their gender presentation, yet argue that being aware of how peoples of different racial and gender identities experience the world is not divisive at all but rather a move towards unity. Scholarship on race has supported the idea that a colorblind ideology, where someone claims they “do not see color,” undermines our nation's potential to pursue equity and justice for all (see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*). The continued individual and systemic discrimination against Black and African-American peoples in the United States--in housing, education, policing, judicial processes, etc.--requires us to reject colorblind ideology because to not to see color means to not see these injustices. We cannot fix what we cannot see.

On September 4, 2020, prior to the executive order, the Executive Office of the President issued a [memorandum](#) requiring all federal agencies to identify any contracts or agency spending related to training that employs “critical race theory” (CRT) or teaches about “white privilege.” We are deeply troubled by the federal government's infringement on intellectual freedom and its attempt to ban learning that moves our nation forward in dismantling racism. Critical race theory is an esteemed framework that seeks greater justice for all through the deliberate examination of the history and effects of racism on current societal functioning. Not only is the memorandum erroneous, it is also harmful in its potential to halt progress towards realizing for *all people* the

“unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” as written in the Declaration of Independence. In 1776 and now in 2020, these rights have been violated for peoples of color by racist and discriminatory systems. Teachers and teacher educators must employ theories and lenses that aid this nation in dismantling racist and sexist structures.

A quote from the American Educational Research Association and National Academy of Education’s recent [Statement in Support of Anti-Racist Education](#) emphasizes the importance of acknowledging racism in the United States:

In the 1970s, educators stood against Holocaust deniers to ensure that students would learn the truth of Nazism and Anti-Semitism. Today, we must stand against the notion that systemic racism does not exist. Institutions examining their practices, researchers interrogating these issues, or educational programming confronting the topic should be applauded for tackling the most difficult of problems. As our research attests, all of us, regardless of what we do or what we believe, will be better for it.

In addition to joining the American Educational Research Association and National Academy of Education in their commitment to anti-racist education, we write this statement in solidarity with the [American Association of University Professors](#), the [UC Law Deans](#), a [collective of justice-oriented organizations and individuals](#), and many others who are deeply concerned by the dangers of denying the truths of our history and infringing on academic freedoms.

References

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