In Schools, Talk about Racism Can Reduce Bias

New laws prohibit these conversations, but dialogue dispels bias and distress

By Camilla Mutoni Griffiths and Nicky Sullivan

“Where are the Native Americans now?” asked fifth grade students in an Iowa City classroom last year. There are many ways their teacher, Melanie Hester, might have answered. She could have pointed out that today Native Americans live in cities and towns across the U.S. About 20 percent live on reservations, and Hester could have used that to open a discussion of the U.S. government’s forcible movement and isolation of tribes. Hester might have also discussed how European and American settlers brutally killed many Native Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Instead she evaded the question and continued her lesson without offering historical context for her students to understand the present. Teachers across the country are avoiding explicit conversations about race, racism and racial inequality because of a series of recent laws passed in several states. In Iowa, for example, a law prohibits any teaching that suggests the U.S. is “fundamentally or systematically racist or sexist.” The Iowa law also specifies that teachers must ensure that no student feels “discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of that individual’s race or sex.” The laws in other states lay out similar logic.

The legal language seems, for the most part, protective of children. But the effect is quite the opposite. As psychologists who study how parents and teachers communicate with kids about race, we can attest to an ever growing body of scientific evidence that suggests these laws are failing the children they purport to help.

First, years of research make it evident that kids notice racial and ethnic disparities from an early age. For example, psychologists have found that white kids as young as age four will consistently pair white families with higher-wealth items (such as nice cars and bigger houses) and Black families with lower-wealth items (for instance, run-down cars and smaller houses). In other words, very young children are aware of persistent racial disparities in wealth. Around the same age, children begin forming preferences for wealthier kids with more “stuff,” which, given the link between wealth and racial background in the U.S., may result in white children preferring and choosing to play with other white peers over Black peers.

Second, we know that when children notice differences between people or groups, they usually look for an explanation. Here a psychological principle called the inference bias comes into play. In general, when we see someone behave in a distinctly different way from others, we assume there is something inherently different about that person. Adults often fall into this trap: if someone cuts you off on the highway, you are likely to assume they are a bad driver rather than assume, for instance, that they are a good driver who happens to be rushing to a hospital in an emergency. In the same way, children are more likely to attribute a wealth difference between communities to the groups’ capabilities or intelligence rather than something external, such as a historical advantage one group has had over another. Children often go one step further and think that groups are biologically or innately different. These attitudes are what psychologists call essentialist beliefs because
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In other words, without explicit discussions about race and the external, rather than internal, causes of racial disparities, children will come to the wrong conclusions and may develop racial biases. In principle, these problems could apply to any child who is not given greater context for racial differences. White children may be especially at risk because they are often the least likely to have conversations about racism with their families. In fact, one of us (Sullivan) tracked almost 1,000 parents in 2020 and found that white Americans were significantly less likely to talk to their children about race than Black Americans, even after the much publicized murder of George Floyd prompted national protests and dialogue about racism.

When we think about new laws limiting discussion of race in schools, it’s critical to keep in mind how they will impact children of color specifically. The research we’ve discussed suggests that students will be more likely to develop racially biased views in the absence of explicit lessons. As a result, children of color are likely to face more discrimination, not less. This outcome is clearly at odds with the language of the laws, which explicitly state that children should not be made to feel psychological distress because of their race. Yet that is precisely what will happen if children of color face more discrimination.

In contrast, explicit conversations with kids about racial disparities can help reduce some of the negative consequences we have described. In one study, white elementary school students who received history lessons about racial discrimination faced by Black people had more positive views of Black people and were less likely to hold stereotypes than students who didn’t receive such lessons. And those lessons did not lead either white or Black children to hold more negative views of white Americans, which is a commonly voiced concern among those who oppose teaching about racism. There is also early evidence from a preprint paper (which has not yet been through peer review) that when parents engage in honest, accurate conversations about race with their children, it can decrease kids’ racial biases.

The laws passed in Iowa and elsewhere claim to protect kids from forming racist beliefs, but the research suggests they are more likely to do the opposite. When it comes to children’s understanding of racism and the development of racist beliefs, the biggest danger isn’t teaching or talking to children about these topics—it’s staying quiet. 😢

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