



How Pointing to Economic Injustice Can Start Fruitful Classroom Conversations about Race

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As concerns about racial inequality intensify across the country, some groups voice strong opposition to classroom conversations about these issues. Many of these mostly right-wing opponents have taken to denouncing “critical race theory,” a research perspective that points to the pervasive and persistent ways in which non-white Americans have been denied opportunities to get ahead through hard work, as promised by the “American Dream.” How might scholars, educators, and citizens who see valuable insights in this line of thought make arguments in forms less vulnerable to resistance and misrepresentation? We offer suggestions based on our classroom experiences at the University of North Georgia, an institution nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains within driving distance of the metropolitan areas around Atlanta.

Some opponents of efforts to examine racial biases in U.S. society believe that educators are telling students that all white people are guilty of racial motivations, and that all whites have had easy lives, free from struggle or strife. This is simply inaccurate. Those who theorize and teach about imbalances of racial power are not talking about individuals’ intentions, and they do not deny that many white Americans and their communities struggle with deprivations and inequalities. They simply aim to position those obstacles within broader structures of power and inequality, many of which put Black Americans and other Americans of color at pervasive disadvantage.

Understanding Critical Race Theory

To offer a brief encapsulation, Critical Race Theory is a perspective debated mostly by university scholars that refers to the examination of societal institutions as sets of social practices and outlooks that have been shaped amidst imbalance of power along racial lines. This approach highlights ways in which racial dynamics and power imbalances are woven into ongoing social interactions and the routine practices of major institutions. For example, even though actual drug use is equal among white and Black individuals in the United States, Black Americans make up the majority of people who are arrested and incarcerated for drug infractions. Critical race theorists endeavor to make sense of how situations such as these have developed.

Many of the loudest opponents of teaching about racial obstacles falsely claim that such instruction implies that all white Americans, as individuals, are knowingly racist in their actions toward other individuals. In fact, theories about institutional racial practices focus on long-standing structures and policies that can cause even well-intentioned people to put Black people at a disadvantage. The cumulative effects of taken-for-granted practices can deny Black Americans opportunities to accumulate the resources necessary for successful lives and stable families—which in turn prevents them from making full contributions to the country’s growth and welfare. Examples include residential redlining that relegated Black people to poor neighborhoods with substandard schools and services, as well as overall patterns of education funding that deliver more resources per pupil to mostly white elementary and secondary schools compared to those that predominantly serve Black and brown children and teenagers.

How We Approach Challenging Conversations

At the University of North Georgia, education about social and racial justice must meet unique challenges. When conversations start out with assertions about racial privilege, white students often push back, quite viscerally, especially those who have experienced tumultuous and impoverished childhoods. Their initial instinct to deny and deflect arguments about racial advantages may be bolstered by assumptions that anyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps if they try hard enough. Beyond individuals’ own experiences and

assumptions, right-wing media outlets offer a steady stream of rhetoric denying any white privileges and denouncing liberals who supposedly are “trying to make you feel guilty for being white.”

To navigate these realities, we focus first on exploring the existence of class segregation and socioeconomic inequalities—at both the society-wide level and the level of personal experiences. Although our white students, the majority, at first find it hard to grasp the idea of white privilege, arguments about class inequality often resonate with their lived experiences. Many of our students are first generation college students with family narratives centered on coming “from nothing.”

We start with data about increasing economic disparities, wage stagnation, wealth concentration, and the lack of socioeconomic mobility, noting that a majority of young people growing up in the wealthiest country on the planet are living in poverty. Many of our students, including whites who come from less-than-affluent backgrounds, are able to understand the impact of such systemic inequalities in part by reflecting on their own lived experiences of economic deprivation. After students grasp the existence of pervasive socioeconomic inequalities, it becomes easier to introduce the additional disadvantages structured by race. In short, once white students are willing to acknowledge that systematic injustice exists along class lines, it becomes easier for them to accept the data showing that systematic racial injustice also exists. They can see how racial inequities can exacerbate the injustices experienced by people of color and Black Americans in particular.

The Pedagogical Bottom Line

As the nation continues to negotiate social conversations surrounding race and historic and contemporary race relations, educators must consider pragmatic approaches to make challenging content accessible to our students. Starting with systematic economic disparities helps do exactly that. The goal is not to suggest that economic inequality matters more than racial inequality, but rather to use young people’s ability to “see” economic inequality as a leverage point. Although some in American society want to downplay inequalities of all kinds, and especially blot out awareness of persistent racial inequities, widely shared experiences of wealth inequality and economic barriers allow instructors to establish a baseline of understanding and empathy—especially for students who may be, at first, especially resistant to concepts that pervasive advantages and disadvantages can be built into the very structure of important economic, social, and political institutions. Once they see the economic side, they are better prepared to see the racial aspects.