

# Using Anti-Racist Education to Diminish Educational Debt

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**Abstract**

Bringing in student culture, ethnicity, and backgrounds into the classroom can be beneficial for all learners (Gay, 2013). Anthropologists have been urging schools to insert culture into education instead of education into culture for decades (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Yet, our country is more divided than ever. There continue to be dramatic gaps in performance between White students and Black Indigenous People of Color students. Therefore, schools must push past multicultural education and the notion of integrating culture into schools and instead commit to implementing anti-racist education. There are three common goals of anti-racist education: (a) identifying or making visible systematic oppression; (b) challenging denial of complicity in such oppression; and (c) transforming structural inequalities. The adoption of an anti-racist education through the implementation of these goals is the only way that schools will start closing the opportunity gaps that have been plaguing our schools for decades. The steps necessary for educators and schools to achieve these goals are described in this paper.

*Keywords: Anti-racist education, Educational debts, Multi-Cultural Education.*

### **The Importance of Implementing Anti-Racist Education**

Social movements erupted around the world after the killing of another unarmed Black man, George Floyd, perhaps because the effects of systematic racism in the United States have now become more apparent than ever to many. As protests explode around the country, the disparities in healthcare, opportunities, wealth, and education can no longer be ignored (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

In an effort to address the racial disparities that have long been a part of the education system, the term “achievement gap” must be analyzed and reconsidered. The term achievement gap has been a widely used buzzword in education for decades and many educators use the term without question. However, there are many problems behind the term (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The data shows that Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are continuously underperforming on standardized tests compared to White students. Referencing this disparity as an achievement gap, however, it also suggests that BIPOC are not doing their part in terms of their education. This terminology is often used to place blame on children and their parents. In contrast, the term “educational debt” encourages us to stop placing blame on students and to start looking at and working toward closing the funding gap (Ladson-Billings, 2007). For example, schools in the suburbs, that often serve predominantly White students, receive more funding than urban schools that often serve predominantly BIPOC students. Urban schools in Chicago (87% BIPOC students), Philadelphia (79% BIPOC students), and New York City (72% BIPOC students) receive ~\$10,000 less per student than suburban schools (Kozol, 2005). That is, U.S. schools are disproportionality funded that serve predominantly White students. This unequal funding has resulted in unequal materials and opportunities for White children and fewer opportunities for BIPOC children.

The inequitable opportunities for BIPOC children cannot simply be fixed with more funding. For decades, schools have been seeing influxes in their population of BIPOC students. Currently, BIPOC students make up approximately half of the student population (Ahmad & Boser, 2014). While the number of BIPOC students continue to rise, 80% of the teachers in the United States are White (Ahmad & Boser, 2014), which can cause a disconnect between students and teachers.

One cause for this disconnect is the concept of Whiteness. Whiteness is the idea that the self-awareness of White people is often limited by a blind spot around the meaning and impact of being White in a multiracial society (Altman & N. Altman 2013). In the United States, these blind spots can lead to negative outcomes in the classroom. Teachers having different backgrounds than the students they are teaching, can present many challenges (Utt & Tochluk, 2016). Many teachers do not recognize the assets that BIPOC students bring into the classroom. Teachers often view racial and cultural differences as breaking White cultural norms and see them as students' weakness. Since White teachers often view student behavior from a lens of Whiteness an overrepresentation of BIPOC children are disproportionately referred to special needs programs and are underrepresented in gifted programs (Howard, 2003). In order to seek change, educators must be willing to change a system that is disadvantaging, marginalizing, and oppressing BIPOC students. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to review anti-racist teaching methods that could help to diminish the educational debt that has accrued.

### **Review of Literature**

Anti-racist education is that of a deliberately politicized pedagogical approach, concerned with confronting systemic and structural oppression (Lynch, Swartz, & Isaacs, 2017).

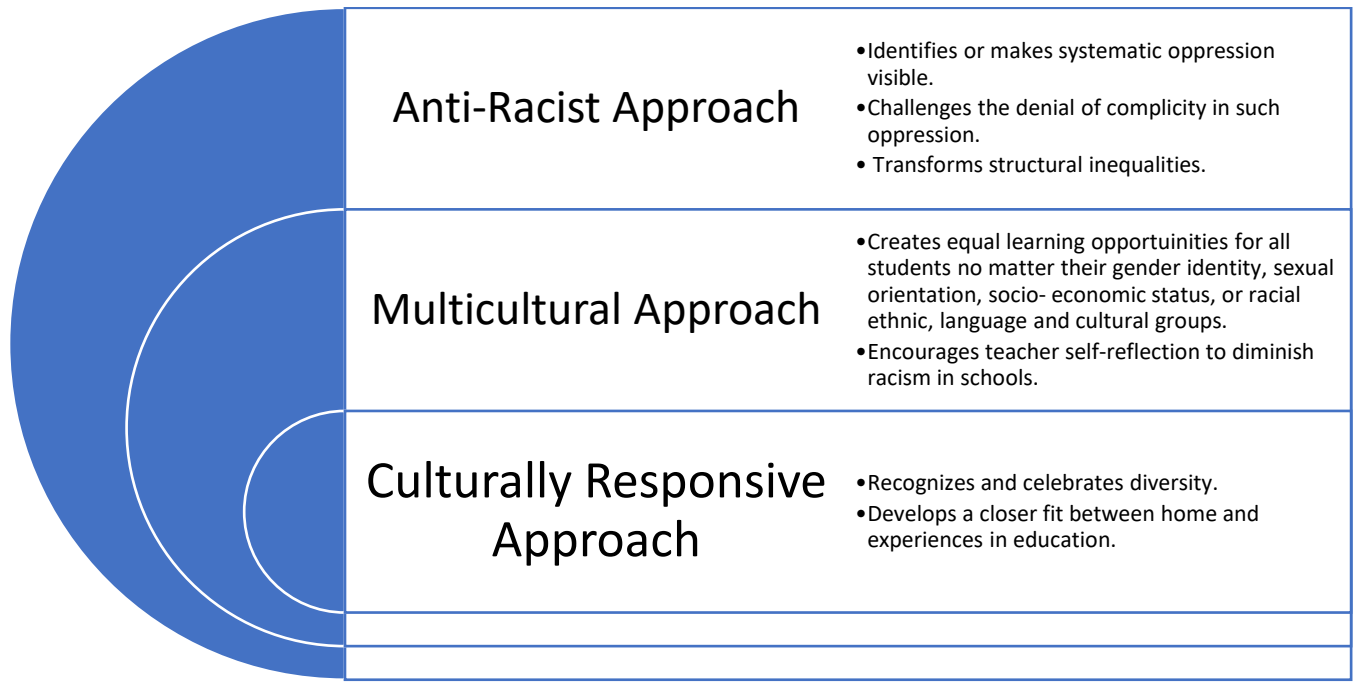
This topic has been widely researched in the US, UK, and Canada with a focus primarily on higher education. After closely reviewing this research, Lynch, Swartz, & Isaacs (2017) identify three common goals of anti-racist education: (a) identifying or making visible systematic oppression; (b) challenging denial of complicity in such oppression; and (c) transforming structural inequalities.

Research has also identified many different challenges schools faced when trying to implement an anti-racist education. One of the biggest challenges identified is getting both staff and students to recognize and accept that systemic racism does exist. Drawing attention to systemic racism is often met with resistance by both White students and White teachers with selective perceptions of reality, guilt, and anger (Lynch, Swartz, & Isaacs (2017). Implementing anti-racist education does not have an end goal of making White teacher or students feel guilty about their privilege. Anti-racist education provides strategies to engage students and teachers to initiate conversations that face racism and privilege head on (Case & Hemmings, 2005).

Another major challenge when implementing anti-racist education is the drastic need for changes in teacher preparation programs. Many teacher preparation programs currently only require one diversity class making it extremely difficult to adequately prepare educators for the variety of diversity they will face in the classroom (Shim, 2018). Anti-racist education not only calls for more classes, but also more teacher self-reflection. These teacher preparation programs can help future educators develop a positive, anti-racist White racial identity which in turn will help them implement more effective, culturally responsive and anti-racist teaching practices to bring into their classrooms (Utt & Tochluk 2016). It is also important for future educators to have a better understanding of what practices have and have not worked in the past. Teachers

need to be able to distinguish anti-racist from two other approaches -the assimilation or color-blindness in race, and multiculturalism (Vandeyar, 2010).

**Previous Approaches**



There have been many educators who have tried to implement different types of pedagogy to confront and disrupt racism. Culturally congruent, culturally responsive, and culturally compatible curricula have all been different labels used to encourage teachers to develop a closer fit between students’ home lives and experiences and their education (Ladson-Billings, 2006). There have been some benefits from these approaches. Research suggests that students feel more valued and capable of learning when they are in a learning environment where the teacher is responsive to their needs, yet the outcomes of these methods have been less than optimal (Lim, Tan, & Saito, 2019). Many of these efforts have been criticized as being implemented at a superficial level with recognitions of holidays and the celebrations of ethnic foods (Abacioglu, C.S., Volman, & Fishcer, 2019). While recognizing culture may be an

important step in creating a more inclusive learning environment, it does not fight to change systemic racism and close the education debt.

Superficial inclusive practices can also lead to other issues in schools, color blindness, or the complete denial of racism in schools (Lim, Tan, & Saito, 2019). Colorblindness, in other words not seeing their students' racial identities and ignoring the constructs of race and being unaware of how it shapes their own teaching practices (Utt & Tochluk, 2016). In a study on racialization, Rebecca Raby (2004) interviewed twelve White girls about the existence of White privilege and racism in schools. The common theme across interviews was a perception of being anti-racist, yet they still talked about race, joked about race, and downplayed the existence of racism in schools (Raby, 2004). While these girls recognized racism and claimed to understand racism, they did not realize that their actions were racist. Thus, showing that the denial of racism approach does not work to eliminate racist behaviors in schools. Many people have the misconception that unless someone is being actively racist, then racism did not occur. Our students need to be taught that racism exists, and it exists in many forms.

White educators are also complicit in the denial of racism in schools today. Many White educators claim to be colorblind. However, when educators maintain a colorblind ideology, it often leads to a disconnect between BIPOC students and their teachers. Many BIPOC students become bored and lose interest in school because the material does not relate to their own past experiences and they cannot connect to the content (Sleeter, 2016). Other White educators avoid race talk altogether because they believe that their schools and their students are colorblind. In interviews with educators, Raby (2004), found that efforts to not be racist or 'race blind' stemmed from their experiences with multicultural education, which demonstrates the prevalence that this approach has had on U.S. schools.

Multicultural education evolved in the early 1970's and is defined as an educational reform movement whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that students of all gender identities and sexual orientations, exceptional students, and students who are members of marginalized racial ethnic, language and cultural group have an equal chance to achieve academically in school (Banks & McGee Banks, 2010). A multicultural approach to education encourages teachers to create classroom environments that promote critical cultural consciousness, cultural self-awareness, and the development of multicultural communication that are beneficial for both teachers and students (Gay & Howard, 2000). Multicultural education calls on teachers to create a strong sense of cultural consciousness to reach all students but also requires teachers to self-reflect. When beginning the reflection process, teachers should ask themselves: Am I recognizing the different backgrounds, ethnic groups, and cultures in their classroom? Am I letting my own background limit my teaching techniques? Am I bringing in multicultural pedagogical knowledge and skills (Gay & Howard, 2000)? Getting educators to be culturally consciousness, provide cultural therapy, and utilize multicultural pedagogical knowledge are essential starting points in reducing educational debt. However, these things alone will not transform our education system.

There is an overwhelming number of critiques that suggest that multicultural education has failed to deliver results. Schools cannot just recognize events on calendars, bring in cultural performers and hold school assemblies and think that educational gaps will be fixed (McCreary, 2009). Teachers and students do not interrogate systems of racial power by simply recognizing diversity. White students continue to outperform on measures of achievement, perhaps because educators continue to use problematic educational practices and assessments. If educators want to start making real gains, teachers need to do more than just bring culture into the classroom.



Educators need to start facing racism head on, because “school is not a racially neutral site; we need to unravel the power of Whiteness and how it is reproduced in the classroom” (McCreary, 2009, p. 1). Therefore, educators must take on anti-racist approach to education in order to pay back educational debt.

### **Anti-Racist Education**

In an effort to reduce the educational debt, an alternative to multicultural education is to supplement or replace multicultural education with the approach of anti-racist education. Lynch, Swartz, & Isaacs (2017) describe these efforts as going beyond educational reform and to transform the structural racism inequities of today. Hassouneh (2006) describes anti-racist education as a whole school commitment that deconstructs the social construction of race and analyzes the interlocking systems of oppression.

Although both multicultural and anti-racist education share the same goal of transforming oppressive systems, the methodology behind each is very different. Multicultural education encourages schools to recognize and celebrate diversity. In contrast, “an anti-racist education calls for a whole school approach that includes instructional materials and strategies; teachers’ expectations, attitudes and behavior; language issues; staff composition; racial incident policies; parental involvement; and staff development” (Lynch, Swartz, & Isaacs, 2017, p.131). Anti-racist education calls upon all students, staff, and community to act and work together to make differences in our schools.

Boyd and Arnold (2000) argue that, unlike multicultural education, anti-racist education proponents do not limit their focus to simply attitudes that individuals may have toward other individuals based on commonalities or differences. Instead, anti-racist education encourages

educators to look beneath such attitudes to examine the systemic, structural components of racism and oppression in schools.

Anti-racist education goes beyond the facets of multicultural education of simply “bringing” or acknowledging more culture and diversity into the classroom. Anti-racist education demands action. The best way for schools to act is to implement the three common goals of anti-racist: (a) identifying or making visible systematic oppression; (b) challenging denial of complicity in such oppression; and (c) transforming structural inequalities. (Lynch, Swartz, & Isaacs, 2017)

Anti-racist education calls for teachers to self-reflect on how their own past experiences, including White privilege, impacts their teaching methods and practices. Getting teachers to understand these differences and privileges can be one of the most difficult challenges when trying to implement an anti-racist education. Very few White teachers come from their students’ urban communities and fully understand the racialized socio-economic factors and systemic racism that their students face (Howard & Milner, 2014).

Yet, schools will not change unless teachers are willing to have the conversations with students about systemic racism that is rampant in schools. Once teachers are ready to have those conversations, students and teachers can go beyond the notion of bringing in more culture to our classrooms, and they can start working together to achieve the three common goals of an anti-racist education.

### **Implementing Anti-Racist Education**

In order for schools to act and successfully implement anti-racist education, administration, staff, parents, and students must work together to achieve the three common goals of anti-racist education: making visible systematic oppression, challenging denial or

complicity in such oppression, and transforming structural inequalities (Lynch, Swartz, & Isaacs, 2017). The first step in adopting an anti-racism education involves recognizing racism as an institutionalized system that is unequally designed to benefit White people (Utt & Tochluk, 2016). Anti-racist education must challenge the denial of complicity in oppression as well as the colorblind approach that promotes a denial of the existence of oppression. This goal requires teachers to recognize and face the existence of the oppression so they can start the transformation process.

Using an anti-racist framework requires educators to analyze widespread racism and White supremacy evident across texts, schools, and society (Neville, 2020). Teachers have a responsibility to transform structural inequalities. Once teachers have accepted that racial inequality in school exists, they can begin the structural change within the staff, students, and community. Boyd and Arnold (2000) argue that an anti-racist education must critically examine the systemic, structural features that organize life prospects oppressing some while privileging others.

### **Identifying or Making Visible Systematic Oppression**

The first step to moving toward anti-racist education is for White teachers to become more aware of how to teach to students that are different than themselves, which requires a deep understanding of themselves first. Often White people do not recognize the invisibility of being “White”. White teachers assume that Whiteness is an assumed neutral for teaching, and that is often not the case. Teachers are unaware how they rely on their own past experiences to shape their teaching methods (Milner, 2006). When White teachers do this, it makes it difficult for students from different racial identities to connect with material. Research documents profound negative consequences of having a primarily White teaching force with little understanding of

race and racism (Utt & Tochluk, 2016). Latino students have a dropout rate near 30% over the last three decades. African American and Latino students comprise the largest ethnic minority groups in U.S. Schools. However, both groups lag behind grade level competence in core subject areas (Howard, 2003). The racial and cultural incongruence between students and teachers often explains school failure for BIPOC students. Teachers have to be better prepared to teach students from different cultural and racial backgrounds. The most sensible place to begin this process is to start with teacher preparation programs.

### **Teacher Preparation**

Anti-racist education calls for better teacher preparation programs that challenge the White privilege that many of our teachers do not fully recognize (Shim, 2018). Currently many teacher preparation programs only require one course on diversity, if any. It is impossible for teacher candidates to develop the adequate cultural competence necessary in one course. Developing the knowledge of systems of oppressions, White privilege, and inequity are a process that takes a lot of time and a lot of self-reflection (Utt & Tochluk 2016). Racism shows up in unique ways in every-content area, making it important for antiracism to be embedded into every content area teacher prep course. When teacher candidates take multiple courses on diversity they can develop culture competence.

Teacher preparation programs should start reevaluating how much time teacher candidates spend in a university classroom and how much time they spend in an actual classroom with an expert teacher (Clark, Zygmunt, & Howard, 2016). The first step in this process is to make sure that universities are getting the most committed, self-reflective antiracist teachers to mentor teacher candidates. Spending more time in the field with expert antiracist mentor teachers can allow for more time to see how all of the theories and practices can come together and can be

applied to create culturally competent classroom. Culture competence includes knowing and understanding the way in which culture shapes and influences how people think, learn, and communicate (Clark, et al., 2016). Placing teacher candidates with the most qualified teachers along with placing them in diverse classrooms in their training will help them reflect on their own cultural competence (Howard & Milner 2014). Getting teacher candidates to develop culture competence will not only help teacher candidates to grasp a better understanding of culture, but also figure out the best approaches to teach all students of all cultures. Teacher preparation programs must offer knowledge, skills, and tools for learning about cultural and racial diversity (Shim, 2018).

### **Teacher Acceptance**

Another step in making systematic oppression visible is for White teachers to accept the demographic divide (Gay & Howard, 2003) that is occurring across the United States. Teachers need to face the reality that their contact with BIPOC is only going to grow. The U.S. Department of Commerce 1996 projects that by the year 2050, BIPOC will comprise over 57% of all U.S. students (Howard, 2003). Once White teachers face this realization, they will need to begin self-reflecting on how their educational experiences and needs differ from those of their students (Howard, 2003). It is critical for teachers to recognize how issues such as race, ethnicity, and culture shape the learning experiences for many students. Teachers must then be willing to construct pedagogical practices that have relevance and meaning to students' social and cultural realities (Howard, 2003). This does not mean that White teachers need to feel guilty about something they have been socialized into, but they do need to take responsibility for learning about how to interrupt the current inequitable system and develop teaching practices that are beneficial to all students (DiAngelo, 2016).

White teachers need to realize and recognize the advantages that they have been given. This process takes both time and the willingness to admit that racism exists (Utt & Tochluk, 2016). Once teachers have developed a positive anti-racist identity, teachers can start to get comfortable with the uncomfortable and begin to talk about racism. Even in the absence of racial diversity, teachers need to understand and teach their students that racism is always operating (DiAngelo, 2016). Teachers need to be ready to have open and honest conversations about racism in their classroom.

### **Challenging Denial or Complicity in Such Oppression**

The second step in developing as an anti-racist educator is to challenge one's complicity in the oppression. In order to do this, educators must understand the stark difference between being racist and anti-racist. A racist is someone who is supporting a racist policy by their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea. In contrast, an antiracist is someone who is supporting an antiracist policy by their actions or expressing an antiracist idea (Kendi, 2020). It is also important for educators to understand that this is an ongoing process. "These terms are like peelable name tags that can be placed and replaced based on what someone is or is not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment. These are not permanent tattoos (Kendi, p.23, 2020). Educators must realize that even though they may have supported a racist policy or action in the past, it does not mean they are forever racist. Likewise, just because they may have expressed an anti-racist action or idea, it does not mean they are permanently anti-racist.

Shim (2018) also challenges teachers to explore the invisibility of Whiteness and deconstruct how White racial supremacy affects their teaching. Once teachers have gained a clear understanding of racist vs anti-racist and have self-reflected and recognized White privilege, it is time to get their students to take on the same process. Again, this action must go

beyond the facets of multicultural education of just bringing more culture in to the classroom.

Here are some basic starting points to discuss with students:

- All members of this society have been socialized to participate in it.
- Racism exists today, in both traditional and modern forms.
- All white people benefit from racism, regardless of intentions.
- Our racial socialization occurred without consent and doesn't make us bad people.
- We have to take responsibility for racism (DiAngelo, 2016).

It is important for students to understand that whether or not racism is intentional or unintentional, it does exist, and it exists in different forms. There are four main types of racism. Active racism is the deliberate act of telling or encouraging racist jokes. Active racism could be the methodical exclusion or discrimination against people of color and also includes acts such as racial profiling or accusing people of color of “playing the card” when they try to call attention to racism (DiAngelo, 2016).

Passive racism is the silent ignoring of incidents that are well noticed. Examples could include inequitable funding of schools or having a lack of interest in learning more about racism and how to stop racism. Passive racism would also include having very few cross-racial relationships or not becoming involved in anti-racist efforts or continuing education (DiAngelo, 2016). Other common examples of passive racism in schools are participating or not speaking up against racist stereotypes or jokes. Many students deny that racism exists yet unknowingly complied in racist behavior (Raby, 2004).

Active antiracism separates thoughts and actions and declares a personal goal to begin the process of dismantling racism (Mosely, 2010). Dismantling racism begins with the process of identifying internalized racial dominance if you are White. If you are a person of color, active

anti-racism means working to identify internalized racial oppressions. Other examples of active antiracism are making sure that there are multiple racial perspectives in the workplace, joining organizations for racial justice, and seeking continuing education (DiAngelo, 2016).

Trepangnier (2017) suggests that passive anti-racism requires taking a committed stand against racism. A stand that then transforms into action and disrupts racism in its various forms. Antiracism must be active by its definition. It is impossible to be anti-racist if one does not take action against racism (DiAngelo, 2016). This type of passive anti-racism is currently pervading society (Mosely, 2010).

Once teachers understand the different types of racism prevalent today, they are ready for one of the most important parts of antiracist education: setting an example for their students. This is not an idea that is going to be mastered in a short time. It is a process and modeling the process and being open and honest with your students is imperative. It is important for teachers to:

- Take responsibility for our mistakes.
- Attend trainings on antiracism.
- Engage in activities that will expose you to different racial views.
- Read research and scholarship on race, racism, and whiteness.
- Develop and model genuine, long-term, trusting relationships with people of color.
- Think in terms of structures and patterns, not individual people and acts (DiAngelo, 2016).

### **Transforming Structural Inequalities**

The third and final goal in achieving anti-racist education is the actual transforming of inequalities within the educational system. For example, teacher preparation programs should



ensure that they are not only sending qualified teachers into the field, but that they are mentored by the best and brightest antiracist teachers (Clark, Zygmunt, & Howard, 2016), because adequately preparing pre-service teachers before they step into the classroom is key in successfully implementing anti-racist education.

Next, teachers need to take a serious look at the curriculum they are using in their classrooms. Anti-racist education does not simply bring in books with diverse characters for students; it uses curriculum that challenges the way students view society (Neville, 2000). Does the curriculum address White privilege? Does curriculum cite the ongoing violence of colonialism that has shaped school and society (McCreary, 2009)?

Another item to consider when addressing curriculum is to look at the standards. Learningforjustice.org offers Social Justice Standards that serve as a road map for anti-bias education at every grade level. There are four different anchor standards and domains to help instruct teachers: identity; diversity; justice; and action. The anchor standards under identity and diversity mainly call for students to recognize and accept diversity, similar to that in multicultural education. However, the anchor standards under justice and action demand action from students to change the structural inequalities present in school systems today. Paralleling the idea that teachers not only need to do this work themselves but also help guide students in their own journey in anti-racist education. Including these standards allows educators to engage in a range of anti-bias, multicultural, and social justice issues with their students. (Learning for Justice, 2020).

Another way to change these inequalities is for teachers to examine their expectations of all students. Teachers sometimes base their expectations for student achievement on student

ethnicity. Often, teachers provide higher quality instruction to students from whom they expect more (McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Often times educators make excuses for BIPOC students:

- The parents just do not care.
- These children do not have enough exposure/experiences.
- These children are not ready for school.
- Their families do not value education.
- They are coming from a “culture of poverty” (Ladson-Billings, 2007).

Teacher expectations are strongly linked to student achievement (McKown & Weinstein, 2008). While teachers often think they are doing students a favor by making exceptions or holding BIPOC to lesser standards than their peers, they are only contributing to the educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2007). All students need to be held to the same standards regardless of their situation.

Finally, and perhaps the most complex, is to address the funding gap and get our nation to start funding our schools equitably. “In its report entitled *The Funding Gap*, 2005, The Education Trust states that “In 27 of the 49 states studied, the highest-poverty school districts receive fewer resources than the lowest-poverty districts...Even more states shortchange their highest minority districts. In 30 states, high minority districts receive less money for each child than low minority districts.” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 9) We can never expect BIPOC students to “catch-up” when the starting line is not even remotely in the same ball park. Schools that are underperforming and falling behind need help from the government; they should not be punished and lose out on more funding.

## Discussion

Overall, it is evident that after decades of trying to close the educational gap, schools are still failing BIPOC students. It is time that all schools begin implementing anti-racist education. Anti-racist education is a process that requires dedication from school systems, teachers, and students. Once there is acknowledgement of the complicity of all, educators can go beyond raising awareness of the systematic racism plaguing are schools and act to achieve the three main goals of adopting an antiracist education.

The first goal of identifying and making visible systematic oppression relies heavily on teachers. Teachers need to begin the self-reflection process and recognize how their race and culture have benefited them and impacted their teaching methods. Teacher preparation programs must adequately prepare White teachers to teach BIPOC students by helping build cultural competence. Once teachers are more adequately prepared to teach BIPOC students, they can start recognizing and challenging the racism that surrounds schools today. When teachers have a clear understanding of what racism is and how it shapes our everyday lives, they can begin to have conversations with students about racism.

Challenging denial of complicity in such oppression requires teachers to call out to students the different types of racism that are prevalent in society today: Passive racism, active racism, passive anti-racism, and active anti-racism. Getting students to understand that racism still exists today and getting them to challenge their complicity in racism is the second goal of adopting an anti-racist education. To help students achieve this goal teachers can admit their mistakes, role model cross cultural relationships, attend conferences and trainings on antiracist education.

Finally, teachers and students can work together to start changing the structural inequalities that our schools are facing. Teachers should change the curriculum they are using to not only make sure it includes diversity, but that it also challenges the ways students think and act. Schools can look at their staffing to ensure that they have the most culturally competent teachers teaching their students. The most difficult, is to get our nation to start recognizing and fixing the funding gap so that all schools have an equal playing field.

It is evident that years of negligence has led to an educational debt to BIPOC that must be paid back now. Teachers, students, and schools need to stop brushing over topics of race, culture, and diversity and face them head on through the use of antiracist education.

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