

DISMANTLING RACIAL INJUSTICE AND CONSTRUCTING EDUCATIONAL POSSIBILITIES: A CALL TO ACTION 2024 ANNUAL MEETING THEME

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As education researchers, scholars, and practitioners, it is our responsibility to examine the most complex issues and challenges facing the spectrum of educational contexts and to report our findings, discoveries, and insights. We perform this craft in manners that require us not to avoid but to embrace the most vexing problems that individuals and communities face in the pursuit of education. Our work investigates and studies topics that have been unabating, harmful, and disruptive to people's quest to be self-actualized. These aspirations and commitments reflect the highest ideals set forth in the mission of the American Educational Research Association—to advance knowledge about education, to encourage scholarly inquiry related to education, and to promote the use of research to improve education and serve the public good.

Perhaps no topic has been as chronically obstinate in the pursuit of educational equality as racism and its impact in the United States and beyond. In his transformative work *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) raised the significance of race when he stated, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races . . . in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." Du Bois theorized race globally but talked about its local manifestations. His focus on the processes of exploitation, globalization, and oppression in the United States, Africa, Asia, and Latin America formed the basis for his call for decolonization. In his examination of race and racism, Du Bois used a four-pronged framework in his theorization of race and racism. He theorized that (a) race is a category of exclusion and oppression; (b) the color line is global, with far-reaching implications for people of

color; (c) a global understanding of the color line connects local forms of racial oppression to a global understanding of racial colonial capitalism; and (d) the color line is the direct product of economic exploitation, war, and white supremacy.

The theme for the 2024 conference asks the education research community to engage in a massive undertaking of attending to the simultaneous act of dismantling racial injustice and constructing educational possibilities across P-20 systems. The call for a global conversation on race, racism, and its redress is long overdue for the world's largest education research organization. This year's theme asks researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to imagine boldly what education spaces free of racial injustice can look like. How do we think about our work, develop theories of action, engage in modes of inquiry, and implement ideas for professional practice when racial injustice no longer exists? This year's theme asks us to look back, but to imagine forward. In our current moment, when the disruption of truth, attacks on race theories, banning of books, and erasure of histories have become commonplace, how can our work take an intersectional approach of eradicating racism, and all other forms of oppression? Many of the current constructs of racial categories, gendered classifications, and social class designations are created by pseudoscientific frameworks that foster denigrating and harmful depictions of various peoples and groups. Research, in many ways, has been complicit in concretizing racial injustice and oppression. Now is the time for research to be a solution in dismantling racial injustice and constructing educational possibilities.

Ruha Benjamin (2022) reminds us that “for those who want to construct a different social reality that is grounded in justice and joy, we can’t only critique the world as it is. We have to build the world as it should be to make justice irresistible” (p. 11). How can our work simultaneously disrupt punitive policies, oppressive procedures, and brutal practices and cultivate movements of justice, paradigms of hope, interventions of possibilities, and radical transformation? I ask our community to dream and imagine, not in an illusory manner that is uncritical, ahistorical, and atheoretical, but in a manner that is rooted in justice seeking, that is evidence based, as we seek a different education reality. Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) borrows from the Black radical imagination and calls for the expansion of revolutionary thinking, dreaming, and envisioning, and asks a fundamental question: “What type of society do you want to live in?” It is this driving question, among others, that should inform our work. Other interrelated questions might ask:

- Why do race and racism continue to plague educational opportunity?
- What does our science tell us about the role of race and racism in educational opportunity?
- In what ways can our historical understandings of race create new narratives?
- How do so many aspects of education research, policy, and practice omit examinations of race and racism?
- What is required to imagine educational spaces free of racial injustice?

Studying, learning, and dismantling racial injustice cannot be limited to the halls of academia. Our work also needs to be present in other learning communities, such as spaces of communal gathering, homes, schools, green spaces, neighborhoods, and informal places, where the effects of racial injustice are felt every day. How does our work speak to those who are so often rendered silent and deemed invisible and conversely empowered to be heard and seen? Octavia Butler (1993) states: “All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you.” I ask us all to be touched and changed by the charge of eliminating racial injustice and other forms of oppression and exclusion. How can we engage in illuminating frameworks, humanizing pedagogies,

and liberatory theorizing that changes the conditions for everyday people? The call for this year’s theme is to unapologetically center race, racial injustice, and other forms of oppression in our work, while building spaces of emancipation, justice, and dignity.

This year’s theme also asks us to think deeply about our own lived experiences and how they connect us with the work that we do. The examination of race and racism is not easy, comfortable, or convenient work. Many will choose to disengage because of this very topic, which only underscores our organizations focus on it. Talking, studying, and researching race and racism requires listening, learning, reflecting, empathizing, caring, and acting. Our research, our evidence, and our work as educators must anchor the multiplicity of ways that race intersects across multiple identities to create realities that are all too familiar for some, yet foreign to others.

Racism as a function of inequitable distribution of resources, wealth inequality, and class divides has suppressed educational opportunity for centuries. This is *our time—all of us*—and this theme is a Call to Action. As the nation faces unprecedented racial, ethnic, gender, and other demographic changes, we can no longer ignore our new normal. For education research to remain relevant in the third decade of the 21st century, our discomfort must be replaced with responsible action to know, care, and act. The aim of the 2024 theme is for the AERA Annual Meeting to confront the challenge of racism through research-informed action and to imagine, instigate, and be a catalyst of change. We invite the submission of papers and sessions that take up this call to action as the Presidential Program is planned.

References

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