

Anti-racism in Education: A Conceptual Map

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Abstract

Anti-racism is a global discourse that has been invoked across diverse geographies and educational initiatives for decades. But what do we mean by “anti-racism” in education? In the literature the term tends to be vaguely defined or undefined. And where anti-racism *has* been defined, the field has (perhaps rightly) avoided settling on a single definition. This article aims to contribute clarity to anti-racist work in education by offering a conceptual map of anti-racism research and discourse. Based on international scholarship published over the last several decades (1990s-2020s), I identify three major types of anti-racism in education: institutional, instructional, and informal. In addition to this typology, the conceptual map documents major critiques and dilemmas involved with anti-racist work in education. These include: 1) disconnects between anti-racist rhetoric and anti-racist practice; 2) possibilities and limitations of White-led anti-racism; and 3) ongoing questions about the continued use of “race” in anti-racist analysis and organizing. I conclude by using insights from the conceptual map to propose directions for future research on anti-racism in education.

Keywords: anti-racism education, history, whiteness, post-race

Introduction

As a global discourse, anti-racism has been invoked for decades to describe a wide range of social movements, governmental initiatives, and individual actions across diverse geopolitical contexts (Aquino, 2020; Bonnett, 2000; Lentin, 2004). In fact, a spectrum of actors—from community organizers to corporations—have claimed the mantle of anti-racism in response to a range of racist formations (e.g., anti-Asian racism, anti-Blackness, anti-Semitism). But what exactly do we mean by “anti-racism”?

In relation to education, anti-racism has taken on multiple forms across settings. Scholars and practitioners have pursued anti-racism both *within* the field of education and *through* the work of education. Examples of anti-racist work within education include: supporting pre-service and in-service teachers to design anti-racist pedagogy (e.g., Pollock, 2008; Matias & Mackey, 2016; Shah & Coles, 2020); the implementation of anti-racist curricula (e.g., Dei, 1996; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020); and documenting the perspectives and efforts of educational leaders to build anti-racist institutions (e.g., Ishimaru, 2019; Liu et al., 2025). Much of this work has been situated in urban settings, with White educators trying to better support the learning and educational experiences of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) (see Epstein, 2019; Friedman, 2024). Beyond formal education, anti-racism has also been advanced in the public domain through trainings and awareness campaigns (Ben et al., 2020). Finally, anti-racism learning can happen informally through interactions in people’s daily lives (Nelson, 2015).

Given the breadth of phenomena falling under the heading of anti-racism in education—as well as the malleability of racism across local contexts—it is reasonable that the field has not settled on a single definition of the term. Although there appears to be consensus in the literature that anti-racism broadly involves resisting racial hierarchies predicated on the dehumanization of

subaltern groups (Mills 1997), scholars have noted that specific definitions of anti-racism are hard to find (Gillborn 2004; Gilroy 1992). Indeed, Gillborn (2006) has lamented that too often anti-racism has been “reduced to a meaningless slogan that is evacuated of all critical content” (p. 14).

Lack of definitional clarity matters because it makes it difficult for researchers to build on each other’s work and for practitioners to design effective anti-racist initiatives. In response to this problem, Gillborn (2006) called for an “appropriately critical yet accessible conceptual map [of anti-racism]” (p. 13). However, apart from a few efforts to organize parts of the anti-racism literature (see Aquino, 2020; O’Brien, 2009), the field has yet to produce a map specific to education (Paradies, 2016).

This article offers a conceptual map of anti-racism research and discourse in education. For context, I begin by briefly tracing the historical origins of anti-racist terminology and its development as a concept since the early 1900s. Next, I present the first part of the conceptual map: a typology of major areas of anti-racist work in education. To illustrate each area of work, I draw on international scholarship from the 1990s to 2020s, a period that covers most anti-racism research related to education. The second part of the map draws on anti-racism scholarship beyond education to capture major dilemmas and critiques of anti-racism. I conclude by reflecting on insights from the map and proposing new directions for the field to pursue.

Origins of Anti-racism Discourse

Origin stories of modern anti-racist discourse can be difficult to tell, in part because usages of anti-racism are contingent upon the wide range of ways that *racism* has been defined across time and social setting (Mullings, 2005). Regarding terminology, there is some agreement that the word “racism” first appeared in print and more broadly in public discourse during the

1930s (Bonnett, 2000; Fredrickson, 2002), typically as a way of naming and contesting Nazi ideology (Kundnani, 2023). According to Bonnett (2000), the term “anti-racism” only emerged later in the 1960s, “...and even then it was largely confined to English- and French-speaking countries” (p. 10). Of course, BIPOC and White people have been fighting racism long before terminology existed to describe their resistance (Lentin, 2004). More important than dating the exact origin of anti-racist discourse, though, is tracing how *ideas* about anti-racism have evolved over time.

Through the late 1800s scientific racism was ascendant, and disciplines like anthropology legitimized the idea of race as a biological truth that constructs a permanent racial hierarchy (Mullings, 2005). During the early 1900s, however, an anti-racist counter-discourse emerged. Led by anthropologists like Franz Boas and his students (e.g., Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead), scientists sought to debunk racial science by turning away from the concept of “race”; instead, concepts like “culture” and “ethnicity” were proposed as more useful and valid ways of analyzing human difference (Warren & Kleisath 2019). This effort gained strength during World War II and in the aftermath of the Holocaust (Bonnett, 2000; Lentin, 2004; Mullings, 2005).

This particular line of anti-racism—what Kundnani (2023) calls “liberal anti-racism” (p. 23)—tends to characterize racism as prejudicial beliefs and attitudes held by (some) individuals, which can metastasize into society-level threats to liberal norms and values. Education was elevated as the remedy to racism, based on the following logic: if prejudice is a function of ignorance, then individual knowledge and awareness of other cultures can cure prejudice and attenuate racism (Mullings, 2005). Faith in education as an indispensable anti-racist technology undergirds both Gunnar Myrdal’s (1944) influential study, *An American Dilemma*, as well as the

work of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) since the 1950s (Lentin, 2004).

Resisting scientific racism in this way has value, but this mode of anti-racism also suffers from multiple weaknesses. For example, its narrow conceptualization of racism fails to consider how racism becomes entangled with other oppressive systems like capitalism and colonialism. Although some analytical accounts that attend to this entanglement had existed earlier (see Du Bois's (1935) Marxist analysis of Reconstruction), it was through the civil rights and anti-colonial movements of the 1960s that they gained traction (Kundnani, 2023; Lentin, 2004). This analytical shift also moved the spotlight from individuals to social structures (e.g., formal laws, cultural norms, and institutional practices) as primary conduits for racism. Structural approaches to anti-racism brought attention to the role of institutions in facilitating the flow of racist power.

Overall, the long history of anti-racist discourse reveals significant variation. These historical conceptions continue to inform modern scholarship on anti-racism and run through the conceptual map presented here.

Developing the Conceptual Map

My interest in mapping anti-racist work in education emerged from an earlier research project where I sought to understand if and how the field was defining “anti-racism.” That research entailed a systematic literature review of 169 peer-reviewed articles published during the last decade (2010-2021) that used the keywords “anti-racism” and “education” (see Shah & Hou, 2022). I found that only 24% of articles (41 of 169) explicitly defined anti-racism and that most definitions lacked specificity. This finding motivated me to take up Gillborn's (2006) call for a conceptual map.

Whereas that prior study focused on definitions of anti-racism, here I focus on the *types* of anti-racism being pursued and documented in education (see Figure 1). Specifically, I was interested in: where the anti-racist effort was taking place (e.g., formal spaces like classrooms, informal spaces like social movements); who the focus was of the anti-racist effort (e.g., institutions like school districts, individuals like teachers or teacher educators); and the underlying theory of change driving the effort (i.e., assumptions about how pursuing anti-racism in a particular way might attenuate racism and improve BIPOC well-being). Although landscape analyses of anti-racism research do exist (e.g., Aquino 2020; O’Brien 2009), none to my knowledge focus specifically on education.

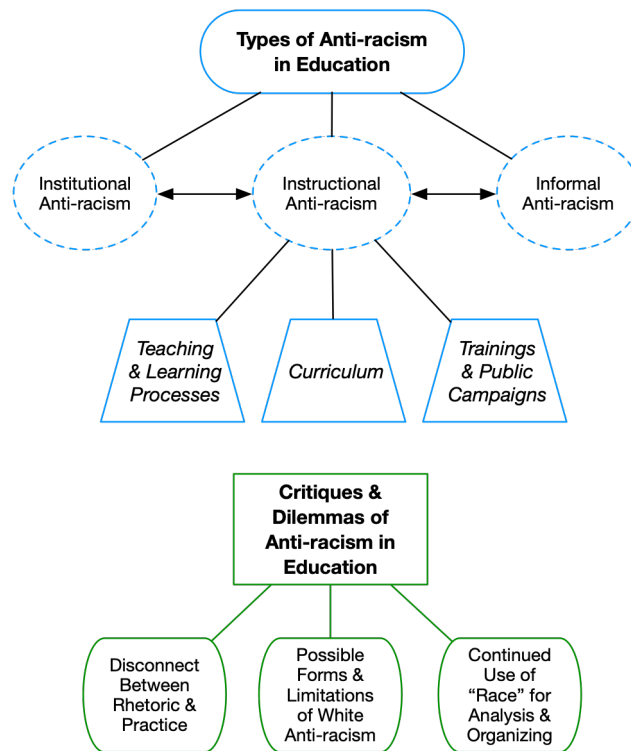


Figure 1. A conceptual map of anti-racism research and discourse in education.

To build the map I began by scanning the original corpus of 169 articles identified in the earlier research, and I attempted to group them based on the aforementioned criteria. Next, I traced those articles' reference lists for additional publications (e.g., conceptual articles, empirical studies, research commentaries, op-eds) that might complicate and help refine the initial typology. I concluded my search once I reached saturation (i.e. no new publications were found in reference lists that would lead to the identification of new types of anti-racism). For practical reasons, the publications included here are only those that explicitly use the language of "anti-racism." Thus, the map does not represent all race-related work in education, such as research that could be considered anti-racist but that opts instead for the language of "racial equity" or "racial justice." It is possible that the overall typology would still apply to this broader body of literature.

Ultimately, I examined publications from the last several decades (1990s-2020s), a time period that covers most of the major anti-racism scholarship in the educational literature. Recognizing that anti-racism has been and continues to be a global discourse, the scholarship I drew from was purposefully international, albeit from English-dominant countries (e.g., Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States) due to limitations in my language proficiency.

In addition to articulating a typology of anti-racism, the map also contains major critiques and dilemmas associated with anti-racism research and practice. These critiques come from scholars within and outside education, who are committed to combatting racism but question the shape of predominant forms of anti-racism. Such critiques are important to include on conceptual maps of a literature because they can illuminate new lines of intellectual inquiry and practice for the field to consider.

Types of Anti-racism in Education

Three types of anti-racism are common in education: 1) institutional anti-racism; 2) instructional anti-racism; and 3) informal anti-racism. In this section, I describe the main foci of these three types, which tend to operate at different levels of the social system and are animated by generally distinct theories of change. Further, each type gets deployed in response to particular problems of racism, which I also elaborate here. The purpose of this typology is *not* to suggest that anti-racist actions can be cleanly separated into hermetically sealed categories. The types of anti-racism proposed here are not mutually exclusive; they are interconnected and can overlap in practice (see Figure 1). The examples of scholarship included in this section were selected to illustrate each type of anti-racism and also showcase their complexity.

Institutional Anti-racism

Institutional anti-racism refers to efforts aimed at changing the policies, racial composition, and practices of governmental, non-profit, and for-profit organizations in order to attenuate racism and amplify BIPOC well-being. This type of anti-racism is deployed in response to various problems of racism, including: the lack of attention to racism or lack of racial diversity in White-dominant institutions; policies that limit BIPOC students' access to educational resources; and norms and practices in educational research that reproduce racist scientific knowledge about BIPOC students.

A common practice of institutional anti-racism in higher education identified by Ahmed (2004) is for universities to participate in what she calls the “politics of declaration.” That is, university faculty might convene to draft “diversity statements” or form “diversity committees” to address racism on campus. Even in cases where such efforts are materially ineffectual, this form of anti-racism enables universities to at least signal a commitment to anti-racism. Thus, part

of the theory of change behind this kind of institutional anti-racism is that such declarative practices—however performative—still have value because they contribute to a broader atmosphere of awareness and concern for problems of racism.

Another form of institutional anti-racism in education has focused on the work of K-12 school leaders (Ishimaru, 2019; Liu et al., 2025; Rigby & Forman, 2025). The literature indicates that “leadership” for institutional anti-racism is needed from both inside *and* outside the walls of a school district. For example, Ishimaru (2019) has argued for the value of BIPOC students’ families and communities as leaders in helping to build anti-racist educational systems. Drawing on longitudinal research within community partnerships, Ishimaru shows how district leaders can collaborate with BIPOC students’ families and broader communities to amplify what she terms “educational justice.” Importantly, this work shows that effective institutional anti-racism involves considering how institutions interact with the BIPOC communities they serve.

Complementary research has focused on the perspectives and practices of leaders within K-12 districts. Liu and colleagues (2025) analyzed urban school leaders’ views on equity and race, finding that most leaders in their study continued to embrace “colorblind ideologies” despite participating in a two-year professional development focused on anti-racism. Regarding anti-racist leadership practices, Rigby and Forman (2025) investigated how school leaders (e.g., principals) can support what they call “antiracist and ambitious” teaching and learning in mathematics education. Drawing on research in a Spanish-English dual language, urban elementary school, they propose a framework consisting of three dimensions of school leadership practices: how leaders frame educational phenomena like instructional practices vis-à-vis race; how leaders make use of evidence to assess progress towards anti-racist educational outcomes; and how leaders can build organizational capacity to support anti-racist institutional

change. This research also highlights how institutional anti-racism can overlap with instructional anti-racism, which I discuss in the next section.

Institutional anti-racism in education has also been led by teachers themselves. For example, Blaisdell (2016) studied and supported a group of ten elementary teachers who convened regularly to understand and remedy White-BIPOC performance gaps at their school. Over the course of three years, the group identified “schoolwide practices that reinforced white supremacy,” such as ability grouping in reading and in mathematics (p. 294). Blaisdell describes how despite significant progress among the teachers in developing a structural understanding of how racism functions—and almost a decade of work on racial equity at the school prior to Blaisdell’s study—little had changed in terms of anti-racist outcomes. This finding underscores the challenge of enacting institution-level anti-racism in education, even when non-trivial numbers of educators at a school are committed to anti-racism.

Finally, institutional anti-racism in education can be enacted at the level of a field as a whole. For instance, in early childhood education Escayg (2020) has critiqued the way her field produces knowledge about BIPOC children. She has argued for changes in how early childhood researchers conduct empirical work and the degree to which BIPOC perspectives are accounted for and centered. Escayg’s call amounts to a field-level epistemological intervention, which pursues anti-racism by changing institutional structures (e.g., research practices) that both drive policymaking and shape the terms of discourse about BIPOC children.

Instructional Anti-racism

Instructional anti-racism refers to concerted efforts to teach people about race, racism, and anti-racism, typically within formal educational spaces and with intentionally designed curricula. The theory of change undergirding most instructional anti-racism is rooted in the

UNESCO-era ideology described earlier: that by raising people's awareness and understanding of both racism and anti-racism through explicit instruction, we can alleviate people's ignorance and motivate them to participate in anti-racism in their personal and professional lives (Kundnani, 2023; Lentin, 2004). Instructional anti-racism has been enacted to address: attempts at the classroom level to limit BIPOC students' opportunities to learn; color-evasive approaches to the preparation of new professionals (e.g., social workers, K-12 teachers, medical personnel); under-representation and distorted representation of BIPOC in curricula; and the public's tendency to forget that racism remains an urgent problem.

Anti-racism researchers and practitioners have given most attention to the deployment of instructional anti-racism in *formal* educational spaces like classrooms and schools (Shah, 2021). This is commonly known as "anti-racism education," which African Canadian anti-racism scholar George Dei (1996) characterized as: "...pro-active, process-oriented, teachers and students getting insight into their own racial and ethnocultural differences; also about schools investigating White privilege and power-sharing" (p. 9).

In one of the earliest empirical studies of anti-racism education, Lawrence and Tatum (1997) documented 14 "antiracist educational practices" that a group of 84 suburban White American teachers reported enacting. Lawrence and Tatum organized these practices into three categories: 1) school/community relationships (e.g., "educating white colleagues and parents"); 2) movements towards curricular transformation (e.g., "teaching about stereotypes"); and 3) institutional efforts and support (e.g., "changing grouping or testing practices") (p. 168). Again, these findings highlight how educational actors can participate in multiple types of anti-racism in parallel—in this case, institutional anti-racism *and* instructional anti-racism.

In this section, I describe three sub-categories of instructional anti-racism: work focused on anti-racist teaching and learning processes; efforts to design anti-racist curricula; and anti-racist trainings and awareness campaigns outside formal educational settings.

Teaching and Learning Processes

From early childhood through undergraduate education, a substantial portion of the instructional anti-racism literature has focused on how to design teaching and learning processes that support BIPOC students' academic learning. For example, Lopez (2008) describes the anti-racist pedagogy of a bilingual math teacher in the Southwestern United States working with Latinx immigrant high school students. Lopez's study shows how this teacher's enactment of anti-racism at the classroom level involved nurturing strong academic engagement and authentic relationship-building with students. In other studies, researchers have analyzed attempts to support students' learning of anti-racism itself, such as Teel's (2014) self-study of her attempt to teach anti-racism in a theology class at a White-dominant, Roman Catholic university in California.

Research on instructional anti-racism has also focused on professional preparation, especially in the area of teacher education (Crowley, 2016; Matias & Mackey, 2016; Montgomery, 2013; Shah & Coles, 2020). A central concern in this part of the literature has been how Whiteness mediates teacher education settings, particularly in terms of White teacher candidates' resistance to learning about racism and anti-racism (Garret & Segall, 2013; Jupp et al., 2019; Sleeter, 2001). More broadly, a number of anti-racism researchers have noted that White resistance involves a complex array of emotions (Grosland, 2019; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Matias & Mackey, 2016; Zembylas, 2012). How these emotions interact with White people's anti-racism learning, as well as how educators can navigate those emotions, remain

active lines of inquiry. I return to this issue when discussing dilemmas within anti-racism scholarship.

Curriculum

In addition to teaching and learning processes, curriculum has been a focal point of instructional anti-racism. This pertains to both *who* is represented in the curriculum and also *how* they are represented. Regarding the former, Dei (1996) has advocated for inclusion of Afrocentric curricula alongside the longstanding emphasis on European cultures in Canadian curricula. Similarly, the US ethnic studies movement has for decades sought to counter Whiteness in mainstream curricula (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Reactionary moves like BIPOC book bans remind us that this struggle is ongoing (PEN America, 2024), and that schools remain “racial state apparatuses” (Leonardo, 2013b, p. 605).

Even when BIPOC communities have been represented in mainstream curricula, those representations have often come in tokenizing forms. In US schools Nieto (1995) has observed that rich BIPOC histories and cultures are often reduced to “heroes and holidays.” Similarly, Troyna (1983) in the UK context called this the “Three S’s Approach: Saris, Samosas, and Steel Bands.” These critiques reflect longstanding tensions between discourses of multiculturalism and anti-racism (Gillborn, 2004; Shah, 2021). Although some treat multicultural education and anti-racism education as more or less synonymous (see Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; Teel 2014), others see a clearer line between them. Gillborn (2006) locates British anti-racism as emerging in response to multicultural education implemented during the 1970s and 1980s. Of course, the depoliticized versions of multiculturalism often implemented in schools are a far cry from the critical and systemic approaches articulated by leading multicultural education theorists (Banks 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 2008).

Trainings and Public Campaigns

Outside formal education settings, instructional anti-racism has also been implemented through workplace trainings and public media campaigns. Anti-racism or “diversity” trainings tend to be short-term (i.e., usually no longer than a couple days) and focus on building awareness and understanding of race and racism. Public media campaigns constitute efforts to educate the public about racism, typically through slogans and advertising campaigns sponsored by corporations or city governments. For example, the global sports organization, FIFA, partnered in 2022 with the United Nations to advance a “No Discrimination” campaign to “rid football of racism.”

In a review of anti-racism trainings, public campaigns, and other interventions—most of which defined anti-racism in terms of individual attitudinal change or prejudice reduction—Ben and colleagues (2020) found a limited base of evidence from which to generalize about their effectiveness. In other words, although much time and effort have been spent designing and implementing anti-racism educational programs, little rigorous evaluation of those programs has taken place. Among the evaluations that *have* been conducted, results have been mixed, and it is not clear that attitudinal shifts sustain beyond the timeframe of a training or that such shifts translate into substantive action (Ben et al., 2020). Others have raised questions about whether these forms of instructional anti-racism are worth institutional resources (see Noon 2018, cited in Ben et al. 2020).

Informal Anti-racism

Compared with institutional and instructional anti-racism, informal anti-racism takes place outside official educational spaces. Although initiatives like public awareness campaigns do reach people in informal spaces, they are intentionally designed to achieve explicit

instructional goals. Informal anti-racism¹ refers to anti-racism that people participate in during the regular course of their lives. People might enact informal anti-racism in order to: mobilize large groups of people to support a policy goal or call attention to racial injustice; survive racism in their daily lives (in the case of BIPOC); and repudiate racism coming from within their own social networks of family and friends (often in the case of White people). In such situations, even though anti-racism learning is not the intent, people do learn about race, racism, and anti-racism in organic and sometimes unexpected ways. In other words, education is still taking place.

One site for informal anti-racism documented in the literature is organized collective action in social movements. If resisting racism is considered a key part of anti-racism, then a number of social movements can be thought of as historical examples of informal anti-racism: slavery abolitionism, the US civil rights movement of the mid-20th century, and more recently the Movement for Black Lives. Additionally, if anti-racism involves the nurturing of BIPOC community well-being, then the building of quilombo communities by escaped African Brazilian slaves also would qualify as informal anti-racism (Bonnett, 2000).

Research on anti-racist social movements, specifically within the learning sciences, has examined the fine-grained learning processes people experience as they take up anti-racism over time. For example, Curnow and colleagues (2019) conducted a two-year ethnography of a racially diverse student activist group advocating for their university to divest from fossil fuels. Their research shows how learning to be an activist involves both changes in people's conceptual frames about phenomena like racism and also substantive shifts in people's identities. Other research has analyzed how theories of learning can be used to describe and explain activists'

¹ What I call "informal anti-racism" is conceptually similar to what some have called "everyday anti-racism" (see Aquino, 2016; Pollock, 2008). One issue with the word "everyday" is that it can imply that opportunities to participate in this type of anti-racism occur regularly, when in fact such moments are infrequent. For that reason, I use the word "informal" to emphasize *where* the anti-racism is happening, rather than its frequency.

transitions across social movements (e.g., from feminist to anti-racist activism) (Shah & Hou, 2022). Understanding these sociocultural processes in informal settings may have implications for educational efforts to support people's learning of anti-racism in formal spaces. To reiterate, informal anti-racism is not mutually exclusive with other types of anti-racism. For example, grassroots organizing groups might develop formal workshops on anti-racism to educate novice organizers on race-related topics. In this case, instructional anti-racism is enacted to serve a broader project of informal anti-racism.

Another context for informal anti-racism are situations where individuals respond to experiences of racism in social encounters. Part of this literature examines how BIPOC traverse and survive everyday racism. Lamont and Fleming (2005) documented how wealthier Black Americans respond to life under racism by trying to climb social hierarchies through faith in meritocracy, specifically in the form of academic and professional achievement. Aquino (2016) found similar patterns of anti-racist practice among middle class Filipino Australians. In both cases, these BIPOC groups had to learn how to participate in what Higginbotham (1993) has called the "politics of respectability." Still, in bringing attention to the class dimensions of BIPOC anti-racism, Lamont, Fleming, and Aquino all express concern about how respectability politics risks driving wedges within BIPOC communities and neglecting the needs of economically poorer BIPOC.

A related body of research has considered how White people participate in informal anti-racism, especially in the context of social interactions with other White people (e.g., family members). Nelson (2015) has argued that family interactions constitute an important context for learning both racism and anti-racism. The potential for family ruptures and estrangements also pose dilemmas for White people as they begin to take up anti-racism (Warren, 2014). Reflecting

on Helms's (1990) stage model of White racial identity development, O'Brien (2003) argues that White anti-racists should fight the impulse to distance themselves from White people whom they see as more racist than themselves. She argues that White people should "...continue to be present in those 'everyday rituals' of white supremacy if they expect to interrupt it effectively" (O'Brien, 2003, p. 267). While some degree of relational rupture might be an unavoidable part of the anti-racism learning process, O'Brien maintains that core to the work of White anti-racism is staying engaged with and supporting the learning of other White people.

Overall, it is difficult to articulate an underlying theory of change driving informal anti-racism because it is not predicated on intentionally designed educational experiences. Given the deeply personal and spontaneous nature of informal anti-racism, it is possible that the learning that emerges is categorically different in certain ways from learning that happens in formal settings, where the explicit goal is to learn anti-racism or where such education is mandated. That is, learning about Whiteness from an anti-racist family member—as opposed to a diversity trainer—constitute very different learning experiences. More theorizing of informal anti-racism is needed to understand its mechanisms and significance.

Critiques and Dilemmas of Anti-racism

Having elaborated major types of anti-racism research and practice in education, I now turn to critiques and dilemmas of anti-racism—both within and beyond education. Acknowledging and understanding these critiques and dilemmas is necessary for developing a comprehensive sense of this body of work. Overall, three main topics emerge across the literature: 1) the disconnect between anti-racist rhetoric and action; 2) the possible forms and limitations of White anti-racism; and 3) the continued use of "race" for anti-racist analysis and organizing. The scholars cited here represent what some might consider both "insider" and

“outsider” positions relative to anti-racism research. For the purpose of building the conceptual map, I only include good-faith critiques of anti-racist analysis and practice.

Disconnect Between Rhetoric and Action

The strongest critique of anti-racism is that it suffers from a disconnect between lofty rhetoric and substantive action. That is, as a mode of politics, some argue that anti-racism has not sufficiently delivered rights and resources to BIPOC communities (Ahmed, 2004; McWhorter, 2018; Reed, 2009). Based on work with a university committee to write a “race equality policy,” Ahmed (2004) concluded that anti-racism is “non-performative,” by which she means that it does not actually *do* what it claims to do. By failing in this way, Ahmed (2006) has argued that “...antiracist speech acts [become] a mechanism for the reproduction of institutional authority, which conceals the ongoing reality of racism” (p. 110).

Aligned with this critique, Reed (2018) points to other examples of what he considers the failures of anti-racism in education, such as the inability of anti-racist politics to resist the post-Katrina encroachment of charter schools in New Orleans. Core to this critique is an appraisal of anti-racism’s underlying theory of action. Reed (2009) summarizes this as follows:

In the logic of antiracism, exposure of the racial element of an instance of wrongdoing will lead to recognition of injustice, which in turn will lead to remedial action—though not much attention seems ever given to how this part is supposed to work. I suspect this is because the exposure part, which feels so righteously yet undemandingly good, is the real focus. But this exposure convinces only those who are already disposed to recognize (Do What Now? section, para. 1)

This can be referred to as the “if-they-only-knew” model of anti-racism learning, where it is assumed that awareness and/or understanding of racism will lead to anti-racist action. Flaws in

this theory of change might explain the lack of evidence supporting the utility of certain forms of instructional anti-racism. In a survey of meta-reviews related to “prejudice reduction” initiatives and “diversity trainings,” Noon (2018) did not find that such interventions led to sustained uptake of anti-racist practices. Beyond their questionable efficacy, Noon worried that educational efforts focused on raising individual consciousness might distract attention from structural interventions against racism.

Part of the issue here may be that definitions of anti-racism remain vague (Aquino, 2020; Gillborn, 2006; Gilroy, 1992), which makes it difficult to specify what anti-racism actually looks like in practice. In education lines remain blurry between anti-racism education and related approaches like multicultural education or critical pedagogy. There have also been few pieces of conceptual or empirical work that have operationalized anti-racism in detailed ways (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997 is an exception). On the other hand, as Paradies (2016) points out, it is also not easy to know *a priori* which actions will result in anti-racist outcomes.

Besides definitional problems, the lack of perceived action through anti-racism has also been attributed to the espousal of an increasingly narrow set of goals. That is, modern anti-racism is seen by some as excessively focused on rhetoric and language (e.g., debates about what does and does not count as “racist”) rather than material outcomes (McWhorter, 2018; Reed, 2009), or public statements denouncing racism or one’s complicity in it (Ahmed, 2004). Similar to Noon’s (2018) concerns, McWhorter (2018) suggests that the goals of today’s anti-racism—which he defines as going beyond a desire to change racist structures into also wanting to change how people think and feel about race—are unrealistic.

Finally, some scholars highlight what they see as a broader strategic error with anti-racist politics that untethers from questions of political economy (Ahmed, 2004; Kundnani, 2023;

Reed, 2009). For example, in approaching questions of racism through a Marxist lens, Reed (2009) points out that an anti-racist frame alone cannot explain why so many Black institutions and leaders in the US supported home ownership policies that ended up harming BIPOC communities during the 2008 financial crisis. This critique also raises an important question: *who* is anti-racism for? For Lentin (2011), the use of “diversity” as a stand-in for anti-racism has allowed institutions to co-opt radical versions of anti-racism. Reed (2018) argues that anti-racism in the US has become a handmaid to wealthy liberal policy agendas. So even when anti-racism “performs,” these scholars question whether it works for *all* class strata of BIPOC communities.

Possible Forms and Limitations of White Anti-racism

Can White people learn to participate in anti-racism? The answer to this question is obviously “yes.” History is full of White individuals who took up anti-racism either on their own or in allyship with BIPOC. The thornier question is this: can *enough* White people learn to participate in anti-racism at a scale that dramatically improves BIPOC well-being?

The problem of how to support White anti-racism learning has preoccupied scholars and practitioners of educational anti-racism for decades (Leonardo & Manning, 2017; Sleeter, 2001; Tatum, 1994). A persistent challenge has been White people’s emotion-laden resistance to this learning. Although there is some agreement that White obstructionism cannot simply be ignored or stamped out, exactly how to reckon with it pedagogically remains a vexing problem (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Matias & Mackey, 2016). Zembylas (2012) has suggested “strategic empathy” as a useful pedagogical mode, which he defines as “...the willingness of the teacher to make himself/herself strategically skeptic (working sometimes against his/her own emotions) in order to empathize with the troubled knowledge students carry with them, even when this troubled knowledge is disturbing to other students or to the teacher” (p. 114). It may

be that this kind of pragmatic step is necessary, but the burden for anti-racism educators, especially BIPOC educators, of taking on this labor should not be underestimated.

A related dilemma for anti-racism educators is the issue of White identity. Whiteness researchers have noted the narcissistic tendencies of White anti-racists to pursue images of themselves as “good people” (Ahmed, 2004; O’Brien, 2003; Thompson, 2003). As Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) put it, in White anti-racism the racist is “always someone else” (p. 151). Other anti-racism scholars argue that supporting White learners to locate healthy identities *as White people* is an important and even necessary part of the anti-racism learning process (Crowley, 2016; Helms, 1990; Tatum, 1994). In taking an asset-based view of White identity, this perspective assumes that Whiteness can be reconstructed into something that White people can live with and even embrace (Helms, 1990). Another approach is for White people to accept that anti-racism for them is fundamentally rife with ideological and practical contradictions, such that the best outcome is to accept that they can be both racist and anti-racist simultaneously (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013).

Beyond the challenges of developing White anti-racists, there are also questions about what White anti-racism itself can and should be. As many anti-racism educators have experienced, White people—especially those just beginning to understand racism—quickly move to the question: “What should I do now?” In reflecting on the White lineage of Whiteness studies (e.g., Frankenberg, 1993), Ahmed (2004) has argued against the idea that research on Whiteness should be about *doing* anything. Instead, she suggests that Whiteness studies should remain in an analytical mode, “...attending to forms of white racism and white privilege that are not undone” (para. 58). Relatedly, Leonardo (2022) has suggested that perhaps what is needed is a “White supremacy studies,” rather than Whiteness studies. Overall, these critiques provoke

larger questions about the limits of White anti-racism. If White people will continue to hold power for the foreseeable future, then where are the edges of White responsibility to BIPOC communities?

Continued Use of “Race” for Anti-racist Analysis and Organizing

A long-standing dilemma in anti-racism discourse has been the problem of “race” itself: is it still a useful concept? (Paradies, 2005). As a core technology of racism, what are the risks in reifying race by continuing to center it in anti-racist analysis and organizing? Political conservatives have deployed post-race discourse as a way of moving past racism altogether, such as US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts’s infamous statement that “the way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race” (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* 2007). But all post-race thought should not be understood as automatically synonymous with the denial of racism. Post-race critiques can serve to push anti-racist work “...to become self-aware and critically conscious of its own precepts” (Leonardo, 2013a, p. 159).

The heart of the post-race critique of anti-racism is that an excessive (and sometimes exclusive) attention to race leads to the following problems. First, by diminishing the explanatory value of other social markers (e.g., class, gender) this approach leads to an incomplete and distorted social analysis (Reed, 2018). Second, by reducing people to members of racial categories, anti-racism ignores complex cultural histories and thereby inappropriately draws hard lines between social groups (Gilroy, 1992). In turn, this facilitates an essentializing of people’s political positions and possibilities, where White people become homogenized as “oppressors” in relation to BIPOC “victims” (McWhorter, 2018). And finally, as Gilroy (1992)

argues, the fractures caused by these hard lines make it more difficult for social movements to find common ground and organize.

Reed (2018) has suggested that a continued centering of race is anachronistic. Whereas it made sense for Black Civil Rights organizers in the 1960s to elevate race in response to *de jure* segregation, Reed believes that this is no longer the case. However, as a pragmatic matter, other scholars find it unrealistic to demote race while various racisms remain in circulation (Ahmed, 2004; Lentin, 2011). In that sense, the politics of “what to do with race” are partly a matter of historical timing: perhaps one day we can let go of “race,” but for now centering it in the name of anti-racism remains a necessary compromise.

Many anti-racism scholars have also called for an intersectional frame (Crenshaw, 1991) that more explicitly links anti-racism to struggles against other oppressive structures (see Dei, 1996; Escayg, 2020; Leonardo, 2022; Paradies, 2005). And as Gillborn (2006) has written, anti-racist analyses do not have to mean the complete elision of cultural frames. In other words, concepts like culture and ethnicity can be useful alongside race to conceptualize how people’s racial identities become intertwined with their other social identities.

Discussion

Anti-racism in education—as a field of research, as a set of practices, and as a mode of politics—has developed along winding roads and forking paths. Looking back to some of the earliest work in the 1980s, it is heartening that educational scholars and practitioners remain energetic about the project of anti-racism in and through education. In his original call, Gillborn (2006) challenged the field to produce a conceptual map that is “appropriately critical yet accessible.” The map presented here—inclusive of the types of anti-racism the field has pursued thus far and major critiques of anti-racism research and discourse—represents but one

arrangement among other possible renderings of the literature. Still, I believe this map can usefully inform actionable steps for the field moving forward.

Instructional anti-racism has received the most attention to date. Broadly, the focus has been on how to design educational experiences that support individuals to practice anti-racism, especially at the classroom level (e.g., anti-racist teacher preparation). Fortunately, these efforts have not come at the expense of concern for institutional anti-racism. There does appear to be agreement among scholars in this field that anti-racism should involve changes to institutional structures. However, there is a need for anti-racism research that connects our understanding of individual change to institutional change (Aquino, 2020; Pollock et al., 2010; Swardh et al., 2025). Institutional norms and official policies do not exist independently of the individuals that make them. Theories that bridge the two are needed so we might better understand how education can support an individual to care about and then participate in institutional anti-racism.

The conceptual map also shows that compared with anti-racist work happening within formal spaces, research on *informal* anti-racism is far less developed. I believe this is an area ripe for further inquiry. For the average person, formal opportunities to learn anti-racism are extremely limited. During mandatory schooling (e.g., kindergarten through 12th grade in the US), the primary goal is to support children to learn traditional academic content. Although it may be possible to incorporate a modicum of anti-racism education into existing subjects, the core curriculum will remain as it is: mathematics, language arts, and so on. In a White supremacist society, opportunities to learn anti-racism will be add-ons at best, if they are allowed at all. After the years of compulsory education, a select few might take an ethnic studies course in college or attend an employer-mandated “diversity workshop” during their professional careers.

Realistically, almost no one in adulthood will voluntarily pursue a formal version of anti-racism education.

What does this mean? It means that anti-racism educators cannot rely solely on the lever of formal education. Instead, we should actively seek to identify opportunities for informal anti-racism learning that might occur in the flow of people's everyday lives. In short, we need to meet people where they spend their time. How are people learning anti-racism through digital media (e.g., podcasts, social media)? What kinds of anti-racism learning might be possible during social interactions with friends and family? These questions point to new settings for anti-racism education research and practice. While we should not abandon formal educational efforts, we should also more expansively explore possibilities for anti-racism learning in informal settings.

Finally, this analysis of the literature compels a rethinking about our predominant theories of change. To date, most anti-racism work in education has been animated by an assumption that people can be persuaded to take up anti-racism by appealing to their hearts and minds (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2021; Kundnani, 2023). However, the field must reckon with this inconvenient truth: beyond anecdotes, we have little systematic evidence that anti-racism initiatives in education have been effective. What are we missing? How must we revise our theories of how and why people take up anti-racism? One key insight from extant research is that, for White people in particular, the decision to actively fight racism is more than a cognitive or moral question—it is a deeply emotional matter that can involve significant conflict in one's social networks, even family estrangement (O'Brien, 2003; Warren, 2014). In light of such high stakes, it is unlikely that attending a weekly academic seminar on anti-racism will be sufficient for sustained changes in anti-racist practice. Further research is needed into the deeper psychological processes that both prevent and facilitate people's movement toward anti-racism.

This also relates to the question of assessment: how do we *know* when people are learning anti-racism? Apart from changes in people's racial attitudes and understandings, what should count as evidence of people's substantive participation in anti-racist practices?

In sum, given its longstanding presence in the academic and public domains, the discourse of anti-racism is likely to be with us for some time. And despite its conceptual limitations and complex history, anti-racism remains a useful concept. By specifying the types of anti-racist work we are pursuing, our field can be more strategic about the research questions we ask and where we invest energy in educational practice. In doing so, we become better equipped to design forms of anti-racism that account for the protean shapes that racism can take.

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The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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