

Who Should Learn About Race in School? Lay Theories About the Relevance of Lessons About Race to Students of Color and White Students

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Abstract

Both students of color and White students benefit from learning about race in school, but do Americans recognize the relevance of lessons about race to both groups? We investigated (1) whether Americans see lessons about race as more relevant to students of color than to White students and (2) how to help Americans see the relevance to White students. In Study 1, we analyzed school districts' ($N = 14,247$) educational goals and found that districts with a higher proportion of students of color were more likely to have goals related to race. In Study 2, Americans ($N = 272$) mentioned students of color more than White students when asked to describe reasons that a school should adopt a new curriculum that centered diverse perspectives. Finally, in Study 3 ($N = 440$), highlighting that a curriculum that incorporates diverse perspectives can reduce students' biases increased Americans' perceptions that this curriculum was relevant to White students.

Keywords

race, diversity, education, White Americans, Americans of color

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“Offering the AP African-American Studies course helps close [the racial] achievement gap by providing a rigorous and engaging curriculum that challenges and supports students of color.”

—Teacher explaining why he teaches
AP African-American Studies (Blackman, 2023)

“It wasn’t until graduate school . . . that I, [a White American], began to learn about the history of race in America . . . As a result, my entire understanding of this country . . . improved . . . Think of all the other white students in my high school who have proceeded through life, casting votes and making decisions . . . without an understanding of this nation’s past.”

—Teacher reflecting on her own schooling (Wiley, 2023)

Above, educators articulate two different reasons to teach students about race. One focuses on students of color, who are more engaged when learning about their own groups (Brannon & Lin, 2021). The other highlights White students, who need these lessons to become informed citizens (Bonam et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2013). While both effects are real and important, we explore whether they are equally recognized. Specifically, we investigate whether teaching American students about race is seen as more relevant to

students of color than to White students and how to increase its perceived relevance to White students.

Teaching About Race in American Schools

Educators who favor teaching students about race and racism are taking a position in long-standing debates about whether and how to address these topics in American classrooms. Typical K–12 schools, like many mainstream American institutions, take colorblind or color-mute approaches, downplaying group differences and rarely discussing race explicitly (Castro-Atwater, 2016; Plaut, 2010; Pollock, 2009). In practice, this means teaching the “Western canon” (Aston, 2017), focusing on “major figures” in history (Kornblith & Lasser, 2007), or even banning instruction about racism (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). These practices, which may stem from White teachers’

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discomfort (Alvarez & Milner, 2018) or organized political efforts (Ray & Gibbons, 2021), center White perspectives and reify racial inequities (Pollock, 2009).

Those who oppose colorblind approaches, including both educators quoted above, advocate for explicitly addressing race and racism in American classrooms. They argue that achieving equity requires removing racism from schools' policies and practices (Diamond & Gomez, 2023). For example, literature teachers can diversify the authorship of their reading lists (Rigell et al., 2022), and history teachers can acknowledge the central role of slavery and other systems of subjugation in the United States (Silverstein, 2021; Symcox, 2002).

Relevance to Students of Color

When schools explicitly address race and racism, students of color benefit. For example, explicit statements that schools or instructors value differences, rather than similarities, among students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds improve the learning and grades of students of color (Birnbaum et al., 2021; Good et al., 2020). Similar messages are linked to smaller gaps in belonging between privileged and minoritized students and better health among students of color (Celeste et al., 2019; Levine et al., 2019). Students of color also thrive when they engage with material related to their racial identity (Levine et al., 2024; Museus, 2008). Those who learn about their racial/ethnic group in class, join culturally relevant extracurricular groups, or live in ethnic-themed dorms, have higher belonging, engagement, grades, attendance, and graduation rates (Bonilla et al., 2021; Brannon & Lin, 2021; Dee & Penner, 2017; Del Toro & Wang, 2021; Kirby et al., 2020; Saleem et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023).

Relevance to White Students

Teaching White children about race is also essential, but for different reasons that are rooted in White students' distinct experiences with the topic. Unlike parents of color, many White parents do not discuss race with their children (Abaied & Perry, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2021), leading White children to adopt colorblind views (Bartoli et al., 2016; Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2022). Yet, because race *is* a meaningful social category, and racism is built into everyday life (Salter et al., 2018), White children develop racial biases (Pahlke et al., 2012; Rizzo et al., 2022). As adults, they are less knowledgeable about historical racism than Black Americans and, consequently, more likely to deny contemporary racism and support policies that harm people of color (Bonam et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2012; Rojas Melo Silva et al., 2025). Many also deny their privilege (Knowles et al., 2014) yet maintain biases (Banaji & Lai, 2019; Moberg et al., 2019; Tuch & Hughes, 2011) that inform their interactions, decisions, and policy preferences

(Featherston et al., 2020; Glaser et al., 2014; Kurdi et al., 2019; Shelton et al., 2013).

Many efforts to disrupt these processes and reduce White Americans' biases are ineffective or even detrimental. For example, workplace diversity trainings rarely work (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018), and White adults frequently disengage from pro-diversity initiatives and discussions of race to avoid discomfort (Dover et al., 2016; Ford et al., 2022; Iyer, 2022; Plaut et al., 2011). Universities often argue that White students learn less biased perspectives merely by attending schools with racially diverse student bodies (Starck et al., 2021). However, this approach exacerbates racial inequities in belonging and achievement by burdening students of color with the responsibility of educating their White peers (Chaney, 2022; Georgeac & Rattan, 2023; Starck et al., 2021).

One promising strategy is teaching students about race in school (Wilton et al., 2024). White children and young adults who learn about racism in history or take classes that incorporate minoritized groups' perspectives are less biased, more aware of racism, more willing to recognize their privilege, and more supportive of racially equitable policies (Bonam et al., 2019; Brannon, 2018; Cole et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 2007). They also feel more belonging—not less—in schools that address race and racism (Bourne et al., under review; Museus et al., 2018).

Who Learns About Race in School?

Although there are good reasons to teach all students about race and racism, we expect that most Americans will focus more on students of color than White students when considering reasons to do so. In discussions about race, White Americans are perceived as “neutral” (Plaisime et al., 2023; Roberts & Mortenson, 2023), and “diversity” is more strongly associated with Asian, Black, and Latinx Americans than with White Americans (Unzueta & Binning, 2010). In education, school districts in cities with a higher proportion of residents of color are more likely to adopt goals related to diversity, equity, and inclusion than districts in cities with a higher proportion of White residents (Odabas & Aragão, 2023).

Yet, people do sometimes recognize that White individuals play a role in addressing racial inequity. People of color have long urged White people to learn about and challenge racism (Kendi, 2019; Michie, 2007). Many White parents have also begun to acknowledge that their children should learn about race and racism (Gillen-O'Neel et al., 2022; Vittrup, 2018). We therefore propose that Americans who are told that lessons about race in schools increase students' awareness of racism will see these lessons as more relevant to White students.

Current Research

We tested the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: K–12 school districts’ goals will be more likely to address race when the districts have a higher proportion of students of color.

Hypothesis 2: When considering reasons to incorporate minoritized racial groups’ perspectives into the classroom, Americans will focus more on students of color than White students.

Hypothesis 3: When reminded that learning about minoritized racial groups’ perspectives increases awareness of racism (versus connection to the material), Americans will focus more on the benefits to White students.

Transparency and Openness

Following JARS (Kazak, 2018), we report all sample size determination procedures, data exclusions, materials, and measures. The preregistration is here for Study 1: <https://osf.io/b5crk>, here for Study 2: <https://osf.io/trhba> and here for Study 3: <https://osf.io/bwyvj>. The materials, data, and analysis scripts are here for Study 1: <https://osf.io/ber3h/>, here for Study 2: <https://osf.io/6tnak/> and here for Study 3: <https://osf.io/8cf4t/>. Data were analyzed using R version 2023.06.1 + 524 (R Core Team, 2022).

Study 1

Methods

Study 1 examined whether K–12 school systems’ stated goals are more likely to reference race when they enroll a larger proportion of students of color.¹ We collected mission statements from all U.S. school districts (formally called “Local Education Agencies”), coded them for references to race, and linked these codes to student demographic data.

School Districts. Our unit of analysis was school districts. At data collection, there were 17,337 districts in the United States. As preregistered, we excluded districts that only had special, alternative, or juvenile justice schools/facilities ($N = 528$); had uncorrected errors (flagged by the Department of Education) in the relevant variables ($N = 251$); had no available mission statement ($N = 1,626$); or had an identical mission statement² to other districts’ ($N = 685$). Our final sample included 14,247 districts.

Mission Statements. To capture school districts’ stated goals, we collected and coded the content of their mission statements, which outline key objectives. These statements are typically written by administrators and teachers in consultation with other stakeholders (Stemler et al., 2011). Because many states require districts to meet mission

statement goals for accreditation (Stemler et al., 2011), mission statements reflect what is happening “on the ground.” Past research has linked K–12 schools’ mission statements to institutions’ policies, practices, and student outcomes (Levine et al., 2019; Slate et al., 2008).

Mission statements were collected in 2019–2021 by searching districts’ websites and contacting districts directly when none were found online. The first author developed the coding scheme (described below) by reviewing a selection of 875 mission statements stratified by region of the country, urban/rural location, and political orientation of the area to identify common words and phrases that referenced race-related goals (see Supplemental Online Material [SOM] for details). At this stage, the first author was blind to districts’ demographics.

Mission statements were coded for whether they mentioned ideas related to race/ethnicity, racial/ethnic diversity, or racial/ethnic culture (one code that was present/absent). See Table 1 for examples. Given the large sample, we automated part of the coding. Specifically, we first used the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) software (Pennebaker et al., 2015) to flag mission statements with terms that were unambiguously related to race (e.g., “race,” “racial,” “racism,” “African-American” or other racial groups, “diverse students,” “multiethnic,” and “cross-cultural”; see SOM for complete list).³ We categorized these mission statements as mentioning race without additional review. Next, we used LIWC to identify which remaining mission statements had terms that might or might not reference race (e.g., “culture,” which could be either racial/ethnic identities or school culture; see SOM for complete list). Two RAs coded these ambiguous mission statements ($N = 1,316$) manually, PABAK⁴ = .94. Here and in all other coding in this article, discrepancies were resolved by agreement with a third coder.

Student Body Racial/Ethnic Composition. We used demographic data from the U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) to calculate the proportion of students in each district who were students of color.

Covariates. Our preregistered covariates included school resources (teacher salary per pupil, aide salary per pupil, nonpersonnel expenditures per pupil), teacher characteristics (proportion of teachers in their first year, proportion of uncertified teachers, proportion of teachers absent 10 + days), characteristics of the schools in the district (number, proportion that were magnet/charter), geographic region (dummy coded as Midwest, South, and West, with East as the reference), and mission statement word count. We winsorized covariates with implausibly high values by replacing values higher than the 99% quantile with the 99% quantile value.

Table 1. Examples of Mission Statements Coded as Mentioning or Not Mentioning Ideas Related to Race

Mention race	Do NOT mention race
“Inspiring a diverse school community to be passionate and empathetic learners.”	“To empower and inspire lifelong learners in a safe school community.”
“Our mission is to empower urban students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to achieve their full intellectual and social potential.”	“Our mission is to improve the educational achievement of all pupils based on the belief that all our children can learn.”
“The [school district name] is committed to providing meaningful learning opportunities for students that foster academic and social excellence where languages and diversity are valued .”	“In a partnership of family, school, and community, our mission is to educate, challenge and inspire each individual to excel and become a contributing member of society.”
“[School district name] staff recognizes the needs of each learner by setting high expectations, using measurable outcomes and a growth mindset to achieve goals. Students have access to an inquiry-based, culturally relevant education that requires active participation in their learning while embracing diverse perspectives . These opportunities set the foundation for success in a global society. Students today, Scholars tomorrow!”	The mission for [school district name] is to help all students acquire the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to be individually successful throughout life. In partnership with students, parents, and community, we are committed to having high expectations for all students by maintaining a safe, nurturing environment that promotes success, learning as a lifelong process, responsibility and respect for one another.

Table 2. Study 1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	M or %	SD	Min	Max
Mission Statement Mentions Race	14,247	11.08%		0	1.00
Proportion Students of Color	14,247	0.37	0.32	0	1.00
Teacher Salary per Pupil ^a	14,247	4,294.57	2,896.69	0	21,339.79
Aide Salary per Pupil ^a	14,247	430.49	632.60	0	4,817.74
Non-Personnel Expenditures per Pupil ^a	14,247	2,119.47	3,276.36	0	20,115.16
Proportion First Year Teachers ^a	14,247	0.07	0.08	0	0.45
Proportion Teachers Absent More than 10 Days ^a	14,247	0.21	0.17	0	0.74
Proportion Uncertified Teachers ^a	14,247	0.03	0.10	0	0.65
Proportion Magnet or Charter Schools	14,247	0.20	0.39	0	1.00
Count of Schools in the District	14,247	5.54	13.29	1	579.00
East	14,247	21.23%		0	1.00
Midwest	14,247	35.28%		0	1.00
South	14,247	22.31%		0	1.00
West	14,247	21.18%		0	1.00
Mission Statement Word Count	14,247	41.11	36.32	0	607.00

^aWinsorized variables.

Statistical Analyses

We conducted logistic regressions with the proportion of students of color⁵ and covariates (if applicable) entered to predict whether mission statements mentioned race. We standardized continuous predictors and mean-imputed missing covariate data. Analyses were conducted with and without covariates.

Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics. Results are reported in Tables 3 (analyses without covariates) and 4 (analyses with covariates). In both models, as predicted, districts with a higher proportion of students of color were more likely to mention race in their mission statements.⁶

Discussion

Study 1 showed that school districts are less likely to have race-related goals when they have fewer students of color. However, this association could reflect many differences that a correlational study using real-world data cannot fully capture. Therefore, we conducted an experiment to more directly test whether Americans see efforts to teach students about race as more relevant to students of color than White students.

Study 2

Methods

Study 2 tested whether Americans are more likely to think about students of color than White students when considering reasons to incorporate racially diverse perspectives

Table 3. Logistic Regression Predicting School District's Mission Statement Mentioning Race Without Covariates

Variable	β	SE β	Z	p value	OR	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
Intercept	-2.18	0.03	-75.55	<0.001	0.11	0.11	0.12
Proportion Students of Color	0.48	0.02	19.29	<0.001	1.62	1.54	1.70

Note. OR = odds ratio, CI = confidence interval for odds ratio.

Table 4. Logistic Regression Predicting School District's Mission Statement Mentioning Race With Covariates

Variable	β	SE β	Z	p value	OR	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
Intercept	-1.91	0.06	-33.11	<0.001	0.15	0.13	0.17
Teacher Salary per Pupil	0.04	0.03	1.29	0.197	1.04	0.98	1.10
Aide Salary per Pupil	0.03	0.03	1.25	0.212	1.03	0.98	1.09
Non-Personnel Expenditures per Pupil	-0.06	0.03	-1.81	0.071	0.95	0.89	1.00
Proportion First-Year Teachers	-0.01	0.03	-0.39	0.700	0.99	0.94	1.04
Proportion Teachers Absent More than 10 Days	0.06	0.03	1.91	0.056	1.06	1.00	1.12
Proportion Uncertified Teachers	-0.09	0.03	-3.16	0.002	0.91	0.86	0.96
Count of Schools in the District	0.00	0.03	-0.09	0.925	1.00	0.94	1.05
Proportion Magnet or Charter Schools	0.01	0.03	0.28	0.776	1.01	0.94	1.08
Midwest	-0.52	0.08	-6.55	<0.001	0.59	0.51	0.69
South	-0.72	0.09	-8.07	<0.001	0.49	0.41	0.58
West	-0.26	0.08	-3.16	0.002	0.77	0.66	0.91
Mission Statement Word Count	0.50	0.02	21.53	<0.001	1.66	1.58	1.73
Proportion Students of Color	0.51	0.03	16.05	<0.001	1.66	1.56	1.77

Note. OR = odds ratio, CI = confidence interval for odds ratio.

into a curriculum. We randomly assigned participants to read about a school that was considering adopting a new history curriculum that covered *diverse perspectives* or a school that was considering adopting a new curriculum that covered *standard perspectives*. They then listed reasons to adopt the curriculum. We had two hypotheses. First, we predicted that in the *diverse perspectives condition*, participants would be more likely to mention students of color than White students. Second, because we thought that this focus on students of color would occur when considering a curriculum that highlighted diverse perspectives, not just any curriculum, we hypothesized that participants would be more likely to mention students of color in the *diverse perspectives* (vs. *standard perspectives*) condition.

Participants. Power analyses based on a pilot study using the same methods suggested that we needed a sample of $N = 180$ to detect our hypothesized effect at .90 power. To account for potential exclusions and overestimates of effect size, we recruited 300 participants on Prolific. As preregistered, 28 were removed for failing attention checks (described in the SOM). Our final sample was 272. See Table 5 for demographic information.

Procedure

Manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to read about a history curriculum that focused on *diverse* or

standard perspectives. The *diverse perspectives curriculum* was entitled "The History of the United States Told by Those who Have Been Historically Omitted" and included a chapter called "Slavery Without Submission, Emancipation Without Freedom" that addressed "slave rebellions, the abolition movement, the Civil War, and the effect of these events on African-Americans." The *standard perspectives curriculum* was entitled "The History of the United States Told by Major Figures in History" and included a chapter called "The Civil War," which addressed "the election of 1860 and secession, the major Civil War battles, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Gettysburg Address." In both conditions, the curriculum was "packed with vivid details" and included additional components (e.g., online module, primary source reader). A pretest ($N = 50$; described in the SOM) confirmed that the *diverse perspectives* materials were perceived as focusing more on racially diverse groups than the *standard perspectives* materials.

Student Demographics. Next, participants saw information about the school's demographics that was *the same in both conditions*. The student body was 40% Black/African American, 40% White, 14% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 2% multiracial, 1% American Indian, and 1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Thus, across both conditions, the curriculum would affect White students and students of color.

Table 5. Sample Descriptive Statistics for Study 2 and Study 3

Demographic Characteristic	Response Options	Study 2		Study 3	
		N	%	N	%
Gender	Gender non-conforming	7	2.57%	11	2.50%
	Man	132	48.53%	216	49.09%
	Woman	133	48.90%	213	48.41%
Race	Asian/Asian American	19	6.99%	31	7.05%
	Black/African American	21	7.72%	42	9.55%
	Latino/Hispanic or Latino/Hispanic American	18	6.62%	25	5.68%
	Middle Eastern/North African	0	0%	3	0.68%
	Multiracial	15	5.51%	32	7.27%
	Native American/American Indian	1	0.37%	0	0.00%
	Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander	1	0.37%	0	0.00%
	Other races	5	1.84%	4	0.91%
	White American	192	70.59%	303	68.86%
	18-24	47	17.28%	55	12.50%
Age	24-34	93	34.19%	122	27.73%
	35-44	64	23.53%	96	21.82%
	45-54	27	9.93%	72	16.36%
	55-64	29	10.66%	53	12.05%
	65-74	12	4.41%	36	8.18%
	75-84	0	0.00%	5	1.14%
	Political Orientation				
Political Orientation	Democrat	130	47.79%	212	48.18%
	Don't know or care	6	2.21%	10	2.27%
	Independent	91	33.46%	135	30.68%
	Republican	39	14.34%	76	17.27%
	Some other party	6	2.21%	7	1.59%
Educational Attainment	Less than a high school degree	3	1.10%	4	0.91%
	High school graduates	33	12.13%	48	10.91%
	Some college	66	24.26%	79	17.95%
	2-year college degree	23	8.46%	46	10.45%
	4-year degree	110	40.44%	184	41.82%
	Graduate degree	37	13.60%	79	17.95%

Dependent Variables. Next, participants were asked to write two reasons that people might give for why the principal should adopt the curriculum. We asked for two reasons to ensure that they had the opportunity to mention *both* students of color and White students. Our primary dependent measures were whether participants mentioned (1) students of color (e.g., “students of color,” “racial minorities,” “African-American”) and (2) White students (e.g., “White,” “Caucasian”). Two RAs coded participants’ responses for the presence (1) or absence (0) of the group ($PABAK_{\text{white students}} = .99$; $PABAK_{\text{students of color}} = .96$). Responses were not mutually exclusive.

Statistical Analyses

We conducted two sets of preregistered analyses. First, we conducted two proportion tests (one for each condition), which are appropriate for comparing the presence/absence of nonmutually exclusive categorical outcomes. This allowed us to see whether, within each condition, the proportion of participants mentioning White students differed from the proportion of participants mentioning students of color (Hypothesis 1).

Second, we conducted two logistic regressions (one for each outcome: mentioning White students, mentioning students of color) in which the condition was entered to predict the outcome. This allowed us to test whether the likelihood of mentioning White students and students of color differed by condition (Hypothesis 2).

Results

In the *diverse perspectives condition*, 25% of participants ($N = 35$) mentioned students of color, and 6% ($N = 8$) mentioned White students. In the *standard perspectives condition*, 3% ($N = 4$) mentioned students of color, and 2% ($N = 3$) mentioned White students. See Figure 1.

Supporting Hypothesis 1, proportion tests showed that participants were more likely to mention students of color than White students in the *diverse perspectives condition*, $\chi^2(1, N = 141) = 19.00, p < .001, h = 0.56$. In contrast, in the *standard perspectives condition*, they were equally likely to mention students of color and White students, $\chi^2(1, N = 131) < 0.01, p = 1.000, h = 0.05$.

Supporting Hypothesis 2, logistic regressions revealed that participants were 10.48 times (confidence interval [CI]

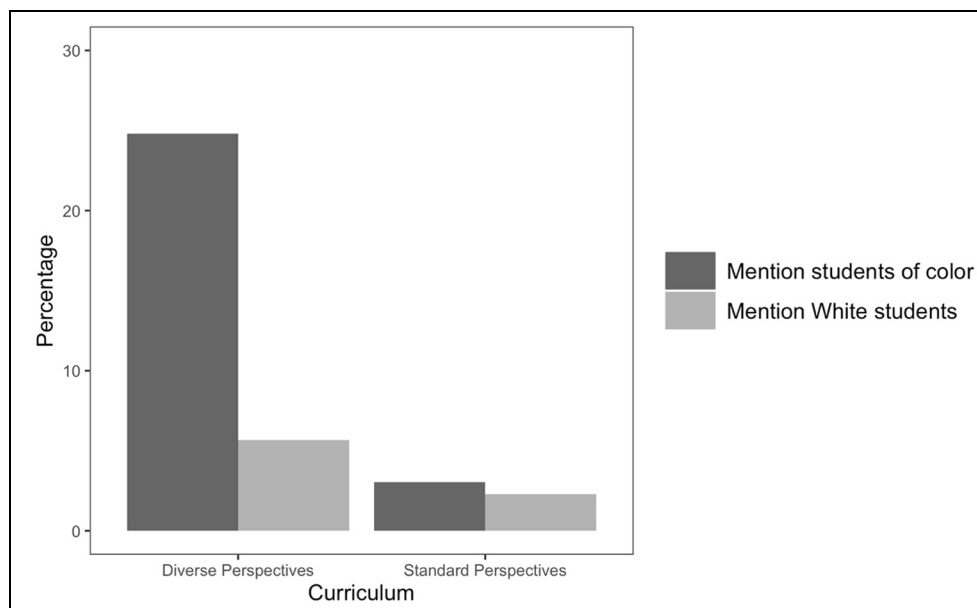


Figure 1. Percentage of Responses that Mentioned Student Demographics in the Two Curriculum Conditions

= [4.02, 35.92]) more likely to mention students of color in the *diverse perspectives condition* than the *standard perspectives condition* ($\beta = 2.35$, $SE = 0.54$, $Z = 4.32$, $p < .001$). Condition did not affect the likelihood of mentioning White students ($\beta = 0.94$, $SE = 0.69$, $Z = 1.37$, $p = .170$).

Responses that did not mention either racial group mentioned the benefits of an updated curriculum, the importance of the topics or perspectives covered, greater student engagement and learning (often citing the interactive online module), and more.

Additional Analyses. In exploratory analyses examining participant race, we found that both White participants and participants of color demonstrated the hypothesized effects. Specifically, we split the sample into White participants and participants of color and conducted proportion tests with both subsamples. In both subsamples, students of color were mentioned more than White students in the *diverse perspectives condition* ($ps \leq .01$) but not in the *standard perspectives condition* ($ps = 1$). Second, we conducted logistic regressions using the entire sample with condition, participant race (White vs. person of color), and the condition $\times$ participant race interaction predicting each outcome. The interactions were not significant ($ps > .363$).

To explore the specific benefits participants mentioned when referencing students of color, we conducted additional (not preregistered) coding of these responses.⁷ The first and third authors reviewed the participants' responses and used them, along with the literature on actual benefits of teaching diverse perspectives, to identify two themes. These were (1) connection with the material (e.g., students

appreciate learning about their own groups' histories) and (2) the importance of learning accurate/realistic history (i.e., that incorporated the perspectives of many different people). Two RAs who were blind to condition coded for the presence/absence (1/0) of each theme (PABAKs $\geq .71$). 48.7% of participants mentioned connection to the material, and 12.8% mentioned the importance of learning accurate/realistic material.

See the SOM for details on these additional analyses.

Discussion

Study 2 demonstrated that when Americans think of reasons to teach diverse, but not standard, perspectives, they spontaneously mention students of color more than White students, even when given the opportunity to mention both groups (i.e., are asked to list two reasons to adopt the curriculum). Exploratory coding suggested that this occurred because participants thought a diversity-focused curriculum would help students of color feel connected to the material. Next, we directly tested what messages about a curriculum drive Americans to consider it relevant to different groups.

Study 3

Method

Study 3 examined whether Americans see a curriculum that centers diverse perspectives as more relevant to students of color when considering its potential to increase students' connection to the material and more relevant to White students when considering its potential to increase students' awareness of racism. All participants saw the diverse

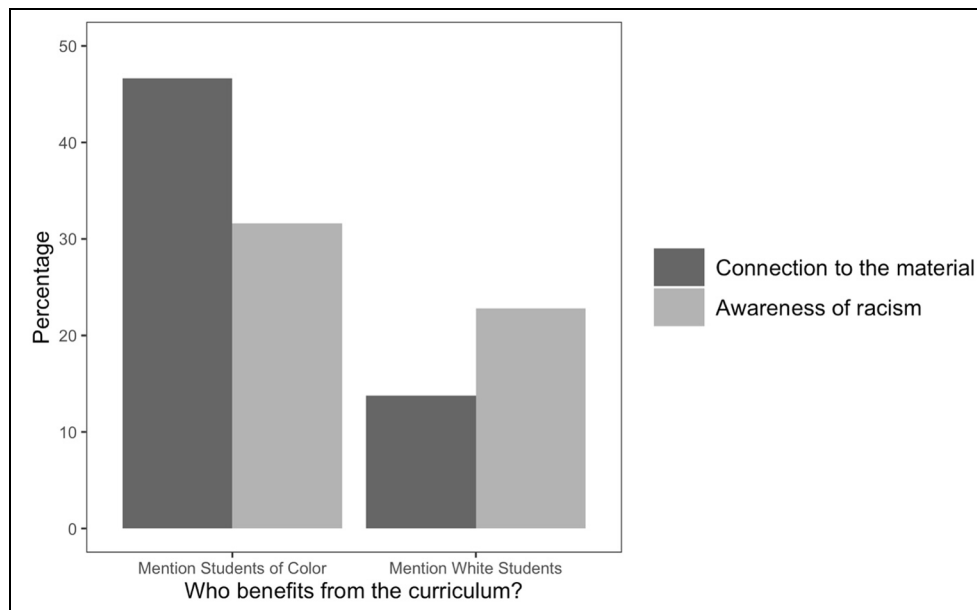


Figure 2. Percentage of Responses that Mentioned Student Demographics in the Two Teacher Review Conditions: Connection and Awareness

perspectives curriculum from Study 2, accompanied by teacher reviews that emphasized either students' *connection to the material* or students' *awareness of racism*. They then described which students would benefit from this curriculum. We hypothesized that participants would be more likely to mention White students in the *awareness of racism* condition than the *connection to the material* condition.

We also tested whether the manipulation influenced participants' likelihood of mentioning that students of color would benefit from the curriculum. However, we did not preregister a specific hypothesis because we saw two possibilities. The first was that they would mention students of color more when told that the curriculum increased students' *connection to the material*. The second was that they would be equally likely to mention it in both conditions if they spontaneously considered students' connection to the material just as they had in Study 2.

Participants. Power analyses based on results from a pilot study using the same methods suggested a sample size of $N = 391$ would be sufficient to detect the hypothesized effects at .90 power. To account for potential exclusions and overestimates of effect size, we recruited 500 participants on Prolific. As preregistered, 60 were removed for failing attention checks (described in the SOM). Our final sample size was 440. See Table 5 for demographic information.

Procedure. This study was similar to Study 2 with a few changes. Participants all saw the diverse perspectives curriculum and then were randomly assigned to see teacher reviews of the curriculum that either mentioned how it increased students' *connection to the material* (e.g., "This

textbook has helped my students learn an accurate depiction of their history and gain a deeper understanding of what their ancestors lived through.") or increased students' *awareness of racism* (e.g., "This textbook has helped my students think about systemic inequality throughout history and how it relates to modern-day prejudice."). Then, participants in both conditions saw the same student body demographics as in Study 2.

Dependent Variables. Participants were asked to "Describe the students that you think would benefit the most from this curriculum." RAs coded whether they mentioned White students (no = 0, yes = 1; $PABAK_{\text{White students}} = .95$) and whether they mentioned students of color (no = 0, yes = 1; $PABAK_{\text{students of color}} = .87$).

Results

We conducted logistic regressions to examine whether there were differences between conditions in mentioning White students and students of color. As hypothesized, participants were more likely to mention White students in the *awareness of racism* condition (odds ratio [OR] = 1.85 [1.13, 3.06]) than the *connection to the material* condition ($\beta = .61$, $SE = .25$, $Z = 2.43$, $p = .015$). They were less likely (OR = 0.53 [0.36, 0.78]) to mention students of color in the *awareness of racism* condition than the *connection to the material* condition ($\beta = -.64$, $SE = .20$, $Z = -3.21$, $p = .001$). See Figure 2. Responses that did not mention either group mentioned students who were motivated, underperforming, open to multiple perspectives, unaware of the full scope of U.S. history, and more.

Additional Analyses. We also coded the responses for mentions of “all students” and found no condition differences ($p = .320$).

Exploratory logistic regressions revealed that participant race (participant of color vs. White participant) did not interact with the condition to predict the likelihood of mentioning students of color or White students ($ps \geq .260$).

See the SOM for details on these analyses and other additional analyses.

Discussion

Study 3 demonstrated that Americans are more likely to see a curriculum that centers diverse perspectives as relevant to White students when told that it increases awareness of racism (vs. connection to the material).

General Discussion

Three preregistered studies using multiple methods showed that efforts to teach students about race focus more on students of color than White students. American school districts' educational goals were more likely to reference race when they enrolled more students of color, suggesting that White students are less likely to learn about race in school, especially if they attend majority White schools. In addition, American adults—including both White Americans and Americans of color—mention students of color far more often than White students when generating reasons to adopt a curriculum that centers diverse perspectives. However, their recognition of the relevance to White students increases when they are told that the curriculum promotes awareness of racism.

Although psychologists often conceptualize racism as an individual-level phenomenon, race-related thoughts and feelings influence and are influenced by cultural ideas, institutions, and practices (Salter et al., 2018). Our findings point to one way that White Americans' ignorance about historical racism, which underlies their denial of contemporary racism (Bonam et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2012; Rojas Melo Silva et al., 2025), is perpetuated. If those who control the curriculum see lessons about race as less relevant to White students than students of color, they might teach White students less about race, reinforcing White students' ignorance. Additionally, White Americans who lack knowledge about racism or deny it may be less likely to see such lessons as relevant to White children.

Why Americans See Lessons About Race as More Relevant to Students of Color

Studies 2 and 3 suggest that Americans focus more on students of color than White students when considering the reasons to teach students about race because the benefits to students of color are more salient and come to mind

spontaneously. Future research could test this salience mechanism directly (e.g., by priming different racial groups before the Study 2 manipulation). That said, even if salience does drive the effects, it is unlikely to be the only mechanism. White Americans in particular may be motivated to downplay how curricula that incorporate diverse perspectives affect their ingroup because they do not want to acknowledge their own (or their children's) biases or privilege.

Americans' Connection to Race and Racism

Our results showed that when thinking about students' connection to the material, Americans see lessons about race as more relevant to students of color than White students. This may reflect the belief that students of color would experience a stronger psychological connection to the material. However, students of all races have ties to racial hierarchies by virtue of living in a society where those hierarchies exist. Highlighting this in race-related lessons is crucial to avoid reinforcing the idea that race and racism, whether historical or contemporary, are only relevant to people of color.

Consequences of Framing Diversity-Related Topics as Beneficial to White Americans

Building on the results from Study 3, we speculate that teachers, administrators, and parents in majority-White schools might be more willing to incorporate more diverse perspectives into their curricula if they recognized how such an approach could reduce students' biases. However, we did not examine how highlighting reasons to teach White students and students of color about race affects support for teaching this topic. People could be aware that lessons about race are relevant to White students and still resist them for other reasons. It is also an open question how focusing on reasons to teach White students about race influences the experiences of students of color. Students of color would benefit if their White peers became less biased as a result of learning about race. However, it would also be important to ensure that efforts to teach students about race involve changing the curriculum (e.g., textbooks) rather than relying on students of color to educate their peers (which is detrimental; see Chaney, 2022; Georgeac & Rattan, 2023; Starck et al., 2021).

Constraints on Generality, Limitations, and Future Directions

Because our samples included school districts (Study 1) and adults (Studies 2 and 3) from across the United States, we would expect our findings to generalize to U.S. adults. Different patterns might exist in countries with different

histories or contemporary ideas about race. We also acknowledge that Prolific samples are relatively liberal, young, and educated. Thus, the Studies 2 and 3 results generalize most strongly to these groups and might be weaker or different in other groups.

White Americans and Americans of color exhibited our hypothesized effects, indicating that our results generalize to both groups. Nevertheless, people's racial identities may influence these processes in ways our work did not capture. Future research could test whether subgroups of people of color (e.g., Black Americans) respond differently to the manipulations and whether Americans see lessons about race as especially relevant to specific groups of color.

Conclusion

For decades, educators have argued that, to achieve equity, schools must teach students about race. Highlighting the ways that race is relevant to White students *and* students of color will ensure that such efforts are maximally effective.

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Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

Notes

1. We preregistered multiple hypotheses for Studies 1 and 3. Almost all were supported, but we report many analyses in the SOM for brevity.

2. When schools had identical mission statements (which usually happened when districts were managed by the same company or were in the same small city/rural area), we randomly selected one to include and excluded the rest.
3. We refer to this code as "race" here but "diversity" in our preregistration. This is a change in label only, not content.
4. Throughout the article, we use Probability Adjusted and Bias Adjusted Kappa (PABAK), which is appropriate when the item being coded has a lower prevalence (Byrt et al., 1993).
5. Our preregistered analyses used proportion White students as the predictor. We changed this to proportion students of color based on feedback that this made the article clearer. Because proportion White students is equal to 1 – proportion students of color, the analyses are equivalent.
6. We also conducted analyses using the proportion of students in each racial/ethnic group (e.g., Black, Hispanic) as the predictor. Schools with a high proportion of students who were Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and two or more races were more likely to mention race, although a few effects became non-significant after adjusting for covariates. See the Supplemental Online Material (SOM) for details.
7. See the SOM for details on the few responses mentioning White students.

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