

EDUCATION IN A COLONIAL ENVIRONMENT

Racism and Anti-Racism in Twentieth-Century European Educational Systems

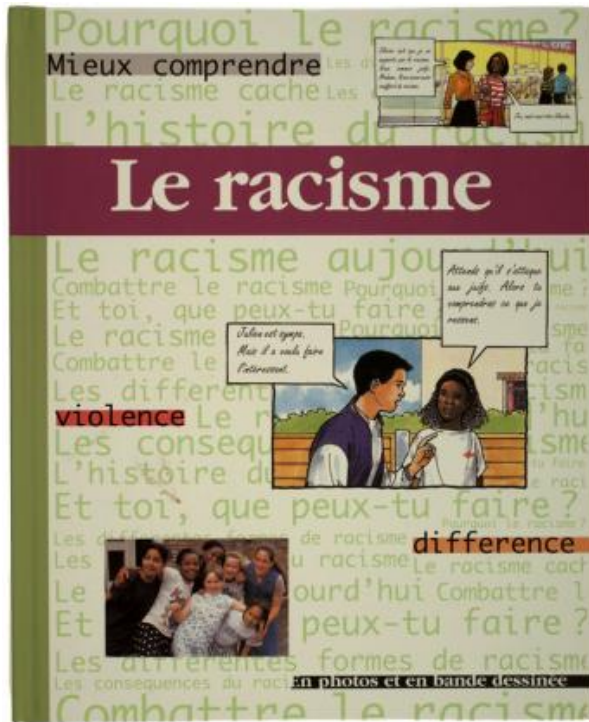
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ABSTRACT

The history of education is an essential way into understanding state-building and citizenship, including the maintenance and reproduction of racial ideologies. “Race”, a socially constructed category, is a legacy of European nation and empire building and European education systems have therefore been shaped by racialized social systems arising from Europe’s varied imperial, post-colonial, and totalitarian pasts.



Races humaines. Race Noire. Nègre, Vue sur verre d'une série diffusée par le Musée pédagogique, Lévy & ses Fils, Photographes-Éditeurs, vers 1900. © Réseau-Canopé/Le Musée national de l'Éducation.



Publication jeunesse de Steve Myers et Pete Sanders, *Le racisme*, Gamma/École active éditions, Belgique, 1997. © Réseau-Canopé/Le Musée national de l'Éducation.



John La Rose teaching at a black supplementary school in 1970, Image courtesy of John La Rose Estate, The George Padmore Institute, <https://www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/>

In Europe's colonies, education was a "civilising" tool weaponized to correct the perceived racial inferiorities of indigenous populations. After the Second World War, however, Western, democratic nation states developed a trend towards universalized mass education systems "at home", which promoted "equal" education. In this context of universal mass education and decolonisation, schools became key sites of race relations, racial and ethnic conflict, and "multiculturalism". Although we hear less about it, the "top down" discourse of equality in universal education has always been challenged by grassroots anti-racist activism.

Colonialism and racial hierarchies

Colonial education policies in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries often worked to reinforce long-standing racial hierarchies between colony and metropole. Portugal, for example, established an imperial curriculum in the 1930s in its metropolitan schools with the specific aim of sustaining support for its colonial Empire. By the same measure, the rights of Portuguese citizens to an education superior to that received by indigenous Africans was also codified. Britain's colonial education policies were more diffuse and permissive across her vast Empire, with a reliance on missionary and voluntary education. Indeed, before the First World War, the British state prioritised technocratic solutions in its maintenance of colonial power over trying to standardise pre-existing education systems. Nonetheless, education "at home" was still used indirectly to serve the colonial project and the racial hierarchies upon which it rested. A key example is "Empire Day", a celebration of imperial, Anglo-Saxon whiteness first instigated in the "white" settler colonies (New Zealand, Australia, Canada) in 1901, which remained prominent until at least the 1940s. Therefore, colonial education presupposed a racial hierarchy in which white, metropolitan pupils received a superior education compared to their colonised counterparts. It also made metropolitan schools into spaces where the colonial imagination could be exercised in the pursuit of national identities and the valorisation of whiteness.

Immigration and postcolonial encounters

Although people of African and Asian descent have lived and worked in Europe for centuries, Europe experienced widespread migration and immigration in the second half of the twentieth century (refugees as a result of war and displacement; *gastarbeiter* from Turkey, Italy, Greece, and the former Yugoslavia in West Germany; workers from the Caribbean to fill roles in the expanding public sector from the late 1940s in Britain, known as the "Windrush Generation"; colonised and decolonised peoples from France's African colonies). These migrants eventually gave way to family reunification and, by the 1960s, a significant presence of non-white pupils in Europe's schools. European education systems adopted either assimilationist or multicultural policies towards these children. The former entailed a strong emphasis on language and cultural education and avoiding any recognition of difference (France), the latter a celebration of diverse practices of other cultures for the latter (Britain from the 1980s). Since the 1990s, intercultural education has been promoted through the European Union, emphasizing dialogue and exchange between cultures (adopted particularly in Italy). Despite these policy recommendations, older, "civilising" narratives were still being reworked and renegotiated in these postcolonial contexts. Everyday racism takes place in the classroom, the playground, and on the school bus. In 1960s Paris, for example, children of African mothers faced harsher racism than their counterparts from the *Antilles françaises*. In Britain, different expectations were placed on African-Caribbean and South Asian children, with the latter treated as more academically able, especially in science and mathematics. Thus, not all non-white groups faced the same discrimination.

In wartime Britain and postwar, occupied West Germany, inter-racial relationships between the African-American soldiers and white women frequently generated racist backlash. The thousands of mixed-race children that resulted from these relations provoked racial anxieties in Europe. In West Germany, the entry of some c.94,000 Afro-German children into the public school system in the early 1950s was used falteringly as an opportunity to launch a campaign to re-educate the German public on race relations.

In the 1960s and 1970s, African-Caribbean communities in Britain responded to this marginalisation by establishing black “Supplementary Schools”, which taught black history and culture and promoted pupil self-esteem in the face of racism from their peers and from white teachers. It took a long time for these anti-racist community initiatives to be accepted by educational administrations, if at all. Indeed, since the 1980s, grassroots anti-racist education across Europe has been poorly funded and under-recognised by historians, who have preferred to focus on the role of the state. Black teachers also confronted racial difference. One example, among many in the literature, is the case of Aimée Jean-Baptiste, a black Guadeloupean primary-school teacher who arrived in metropolitan France in the 1950s. Jean-Baptiste was subject to racialised stereotyping from the administration, pupils, and parents, who saw her as deserving of “extra patience” due to her skin colour.

Textbooks and curricula

Racist depictions of African and Asian peoples were commonly found in classrooms across Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. The geography textbooks used in French schools up to the 1960s were highly complicit in the colonial project and contained negative, homogenizing representations of Arab, Asian, and African populations. It is always difficult to establish how pupils and teachers responded to such discourses. In the Netherlands, “colour-blind racism” has been identified as characterising attitudes to race in schools since the 1960s. This is a textual and semantic strategy that allows race to be dodged or denied in the context of schools and teaching, despite documented experiences of everyday racism by pupils of colour.

Perhaps because of these silences and ambiguities surrounding race and Europe’s colonial pasts, since the 1990s Holocaust education has instead become a major vehicle for opposing racism in European school curricula. Holocaust education has been used to teach children and young people about anti-Semitism as a case study in racism. Teaching about the Holocaust is widespread in European countries, although countries including Greece, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia, and Finland do not teach about the Roma and Sinti genocides. Still, at the classroom level, it is unclear how much effort has gone into deconstructing the varied meanings of racism and how contemporary issues of racial injustice are directly linked to Europe’s past.

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Despite education systems in Europe now seeking to provide equal educational opportunities regardless of race, they are still battling structural inequalities that are the direct result of decades of accumulated racism and discrimination. Furthermore, in the twenty-first century European education is embroiled in a stubborn “culture war”, with the left calling for a “decolonisation” of curricula, and the right attempting to whitewash imperial pasts. In 2005, for example, France attempted to pass a law that would require school curricula to stress the positive role of France overseas, whilst in 2010 the Conservative UK government called for a return to history teaching based upon a more patriotic, “island story”. In 2020, Hungary’s Viktor Orbán attempted to implement a national curriculum that included nationalist and anti-Semitic authors. Despite decades of work by educationists, communities, and activists, confronting race and racism remains an urgent issue in European education.

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