



MAGAZINE FEATURE

Ending Curriculum Violence

Yes, curriculum can be violent—whether you intend it or not. Here's what it looks like and how you can avoid it.

By Stephanie P. Jones | Issue 64, Spring 2020



Illustration by Keith Negley

In elementary school, my teacher made me pick cotton. She brought each student their own plant, and her goal was to make us understand how hard cotton is to pick. It has only been a couple of years since I began to tell this story in public. I kept it a secret for a couple of reasons. First, as a small child, I trusted my teacher and did not allow myself to believe that she would cause me or any other students harm. Second, after some years passed, I was ashamed that it had taken me this long to understand the impact of what happened.

I understand now that this experience is the reason why I later learned to hate family tree assignments, especially those that included pictures. How do you explain to your classmates and your teacher that your family is not missing, but the assignment will always be incomplete because you don't know their names or have pictures of them?

Michael Dumas, an assistant professor in the University of California, Berkeley's Graduate School of Education and African American Studies

department, describes school as a particularly harmful place for Black students in the article “‘Losing an Arm’: Schooling as a Site of Black Suffering.” He notes that this suffering is the kind that “we have been least willing or able to acknowledge or give voice to.”

My story and many others like it are examples of school-based racial trauma—a type of physical or emotional injury uniquely impacting Black and Brown children in school spaces. As I reflected on my own experience, I wondered whether what happened to me is still occurring in schools. And, if so, what does this mean?

Racial Trauma as Curriculum Violence

I started conducting research to find out. Every level of education has been affected by the presence of racial trauma. K–12, private, public, parochial and higher education institutions are reporting racist incidents that include the isolation, bullying, taunting, stalking, intimidation and physical assault of Black and Brown students. Although identifying these types of harm is important in capturing a realistic landscape of what school is like for many students, it leaves out what is often a more subtle aspect of racial trauma: curriculum violence.

"What happened to me that day in school was not a type of violence involving physical harm but rather a type of emotional destruction legitimized as teaching."

Two Black scholars, Erhabor Ighodaro and Greg Wiggan, coined the term curriculum violence in their 2010 work *Curriculum Violence: America's New Civil Rights Issue*. They defined it as a “deliberate manipulation of academic programming” which “compromises the intellectual or psychological well-being of learners.”

Curriculum violence is indeed detrimental, but it does not have to be deliberate or purposeful. The notion that a curriculum writer's or teacher's intention matters misses the point: Intentionality is not a prerequisite for harmful teaching. Intentionality is also not a prerequisite for racism. As I define it in my work, curriculum violence occurs when educators and curriculum writers have constructed a set of lessons that damage or otherwise adversely affect students intellectually and emotionally.

It is important to understand why I use the word *violence*. Although the

shame of not interrupting my teacher was not mine to own, this is what happens when curriculum based on good intentions becomes education with a damaging impact. The word violence suggests to most people a physical act of harm—where fist and face meet, where words can provide no comfort or relief. What happened to me that day in school was not a type of violence involving physical harm but rather a type of emotional destruction legitimized as teaching. Picking cotton at my small school desk was the first exposure to what I would later understand as chattel slavery. The impact wasn't swift or instantaneous but slow, methodical and jarring.

When we reserve the word violent as a descriptor for physical violence only, we fail to recognize the many ways in which non-physical injury happens, is normalized and, in the case of destructive pedagogy, harms students' learning and how they see themselves in it. This kind of violence leaves an indelible mark on students and compromises their emotional and intellectual safety in the school setting. And it occurs all too often in history instruction.

I should also point out that curriculum violence does not exist only as a form of racial trauma. For example, leaving queer history out of the curriculum or teaching it in ways that are irresponsible is violent. It harms how LGBTQ students learn history and see themselves in it. My focus on curriculum violence in the context of racial trauma has everything to do with my personal experience and my desire to learn how that experience plays out for others.

When curriculum violence is repeated throughout a student's school experience, these individual instances can contribute to a larger traumatic experience of school and a deep, false discord between the accurate historical narratives of groups of people and how their histories are being taught and absorbed in school. My work centers on how this plays out with Black and Brown students.

Mapping Racial Trauma in Schools

I started finding stories similar to mine by using databases to search local and national newspapers. I initially selected four separate search parameters using the following combinations of words: "slavery & school; reenactment & slavery; racial slur & school; KKK & school."

Through this search, I was able to locate hundreds of instances of racial trauma in schools across the United States. Too often, school districts and administrators characterize these incidents as isolated and not reflective of a school's larger culture. However, dissecting hundreds of these incidents

called that into question.

I decided to create a database, *Mapping Racial Trauma in Schools*, that would allow me to examine more closely how such harm appears in schools. The aim behind archiving and mapping these stories is to understand what the frequency, location and description of racial trauma can tell us about what is really happening in classrooms.

FOUR CATEGORIES OF RACIAL TRAUMA EMERGED:

- curriculum violence—classroom activities used to teach about difficult histories;
- digital racial trauma—racist images or video captured and shared through social media in school spaces;
- physical violence related to racial trauma—acts of violence from student to student or teacher to student; and
- verbal intimidation or threats between students or from teacher to student.

Curriculum violence warrants special attention because, while it is not as highly reported as other forms of racial trauma, it has an active presence in our schools. And, unlike the other categories, it has implications for every single classroom.

It is worth noting that published reports of curriculum violence aren't the products of investigative journalism. They come to light because the victims' families are using the news media to draw attention to the effects of the violence on their children. There's the example of the South Carolina man whose fifth grade nephew came home crying after being assigned two scenarios: first, to pretend to be a KKK member and justify his treatment of Black people and, second, to imagine being a freed person and determine whether or not he was satisfied with his new life. In Georgia, a mom wanted her 10-year-old's school and the public to understand the pain he suffered when, on "Civil War Day," a white student dressed as a plantation owner called him his "slave."

How many similar incidents go unreported or disregarded?

How Curriculum Violence Plays Out in Classrooms

Teaching Tolerance's report *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery* indicates that our failure to educate students on this subject means there is also a lapse in student understanding of racial inequality, past and present. Not only is slavery being mistaught; it's also the only thing some students are learning about Black history at school. The transatlantic slave trade

and its resulting horror within the American slavery system are often essentialized as all Black history itself.

Unsurprisingly, this mapping project has uncovered that most instances of curriculum violence occur during instruction about Black history. Some curricula even demand that students physically act out aspects of American slavery. I have observed that, when curriculum requires students to learn about specific moments of Black history, there is an alarming pattern of learning through staged reenactments—a practice not replicated to the same extent with other histories, traumas or genocides. This is a common way that curriculum violence manifests.

For example, in 2016, students in an elementary school in New Jersey were tasked with drawing “wanted” posters of fugitives from slavery. Meanwhile, in May 2019, if students in a North Carolina classroom failed to answer questions about slavery correctly, they had their group’s “freedom card” revoked.

Reenactments and simulations do not help students to understand slavery. Instead, they distort students’ understanding of the past and the present. They promote a sanitized version of slavery that isolates the system and its legacy within a bracket of time with only a select few perpetrators and beneficiaries.

Scholar and sociologist Sadhana Bery challenges us to consider the impact of this particular form of curriculum violence. In “Multiculturalism, Teaching Slavery, and White Supremacy,” she argues that “[r]eenactment of slavery drowns the critical interrogation of slavery and its afterlife.” Students cannot engage meaningfully with history by pretending, for the limited time of a class period, that we can enter into and out of slavery without a critical examination of what that entry means.

When teachers ask students to learn about slavery by *practicing* being enslaved people or enslavers, students are not critically engaging with difficult histories. When we force students to participate in acts of curriculum violence, we do so at the risk of situating slavery as a past event with no current connection while also depriving students of its full social, historical and economic context. There is often no room to include stories of resistance, contribution and triumph when the curriculum is preoccupied with having students simulate what literary and Black Studies scholar Christina Sharpe calls “the story that cannot be told.”



Doing Right By Our Students

In order to reclaim our schools as sites of real learning and safety rather than suffering and racial trauma, it is necessary to help prepare teachers to critically examine what curriculum violence looks like within their discipline. Both prospective and current practitioners should continue to frame teaching as a reflective and reflexive practice by asking important questions of themselves and their curricula. Teachers should have continued support for professional development that is antiracist at its core and includes narratives of joy and resistance.

Most importantly, it is the wrong reaction for teachers to avoid teaching Black histories for fear of perpetuating curriculum violence. Remaining silent or choosing to omit certain elements of history has the same impact. We must *want* to do the right thing by our students, even if that means we have to struggle to learn more and seek feedback from students about the impact of our curricular choices. We should want to review and revise our existing lessons to ensure we're not wreaking havoc on our students' emotional and intellectual lives.

We do this so that we can begin the process of educational reparations —wherein we repair the harm that we have done to children by reconstructing curricula that have failed them.

Avoiding Curriculum Violence

To avoid inflicting curriculum violence on your students, it's key to adopt an antiracist framework and pedagogy. This adoption should include elements of self-reflection and interrogation. You could begin by contemplating these questions:

- What historical events or situations am I asking that students examine and experience?
- Are my lessons focused primarily on Black and Brown histories when faced with trauma, pain or death? Why?

Reflective practitioners can't rely on intention as an indicator of good teaching. Intentions are limited and speculative. It is necessary to ask these essential questions of your school and your curriculum:

- Is this type of racial trauma happening in my schools? In my classroom?
- Are students forced to learn their history in ways that are ideologically violent?
- Essentially, can we envision an education that is trauma-informed without being traumatic?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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