

Let's Talk Racial Healing: If Not Us, Then Who?

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From the fifteenth century to the twenty-first, the genocide of Indigenous people and the enslavement of Black people, the voter suppression of the Jim Crow era to the most recent violent attempt to storm the Capitol and de-legitimize the votes of millions of Black, Brown, and Native people, a consistent through-line of our history has been white supremacy. Claims to white supremacy and Neo-Nazi sentiments were graphically displayed on T-shirts, in slogans, through rhetoric, and via the organizational memberships of many of those who planned and participated in the January 6 insurrection. This was not merely a politically motivated event, but rather a racism-fueled frenzy to assert the primacy of whiteness.

Well-meaning critics of this attempted coup have stated, "This is not who we are as a nation." Sadly, however, this *is* who we are and who we have been since the beginning, a nation that has perpetuated what James Baldwin called "the lie" – the spurious belief that white people are better than Black or Brown people and deserve to be in charge. The best defense we have against this lie is education. The questions we have to ask ourselves are: What lessons were missed by those who attacked our seat of democracy? What lessons did we fail to teach them when they were students in our nation's schools? And what can we do now as educators to address with our students the deeper causes of this tragic event?

Could one of the causes be the result of continuing to separate and compartmentalize the biological and psychological facets of learning and well-being? Imagine, if we could have taught the insurrectionists early American history and factor in the actual emotional cost the colonial years had on all the people, including white people, who were the overwhelming majority of those storming the Capitol. Our shared and collective American history is rooted in **trauma**.

Epigenetics is the study of how traumatic events alter the way our genes function. Epigenetics is beginning to prove how the cumulative effects of psychological and emotional trauma are heritable. This research leads us to a question: What

traumas lurk in the psyches and bodies of those white people who were willing to commit violence against their own nation, and to so rabidly seek to overturn the votes of their fellow citizens who do not identify as white? Historical and trans-generational trauma are theoretical concepts that can help us explain and address how trauma is transferred between generations and how all of our students are impacted by the deep racial tensions that are embedded in our shared history, which exploded into violent insurrection on January 6.

The effects of historical and trans-generational trauma have been well documented for Indigenous, Black, and Brown people. However, research on the impact of historical and trans-generational trauma on white people is negligible.

For white Americans, life was traumatizing *before* they came to colonial America. Most of them left Europe by force when England emptied her prisons, and many fled famine. The majority were forced into indentured servitude. White Americans also fled their home countries because of discrimination based on their religious beliefs. Some of those beliefs were so narrow and fear-based that they led to the traumatization of their own people, as in the Salem witch trials.

In addition, early forms of punishment for transgressors in the colonies mirrored the torturous practices they had witnessed in their home countries. We now understand how fighting in wars can cause post-traumatic stress syndrome. Four major wars, the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Civil War, and the Mexican American War, were fought on American soil. The white Americans who stormed the Capitol on January 6, many of whom are current or former members of law enforcement and the military, are the descendants of those who fought in our previous wars. According to the science of epigenetics, white Americans would have been traumatized by all of these circumstances. Their actions toward Indigenous, Black, and Brown people are examples of the saying “hurt people, *hurt people*.”

Studies in epigenetics are also providing evidence that the effects of historical and generational trauma can be minimized by educational practices that include a focus on emotional well-being—education that begins with examining ourselves. We need to acknowledge the fact that for each of us, as teachers and as students, our race positions us and influences how we perceive others. We must be courageous and

willing to engage in authentic conversations about the policies, procedures, and practices inherent in our educational systems that have perpetuated race-based disparities and created the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

Once again, we can turn to research to learn about the malleability and receptivity of our brains’ ability to mitigate the effects of transgenerational trauma. In schools with cultures that are trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive, students, regardless of their race, gender-identity or economic background, can thrive socially, emotionally, and academically.

In summary, if we are to adequately address in our classrooms the underlying dynamics of the January 6 insurrection, we must correct two glaring educational deficits. The first is an insufficient, understated, and often entirely neglected acknowledgement of the tragic and traumatic impact of white supremacy on the lives of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, both historically and continuing today, including the recent attempt by a sitting President and his supporters to disallow the legitimate votes of millions of people of color. The second deficit we must address is the need to provide white students with the historical knowledge and emotional resilience they need to resist being recruited into the caustic hate and white supremacist ideology that were on display during the insurrection.

The resources collected here provide a means to address the educational deficits of the past and help us as educators deal with the deeper issues underlying the January 6 attack. These materials offer creative and powerful strategies for teaching the realities of our collective traumatic history around issues of race and social justice. They offer a myriad of ways to engage young people of all ages in the truthful and courageous conversations they need to prepare them for proactive participation in pluralistic democracy. This is the educational foundation our young people must have to help them resist the mindless conspiracy theories, hateful rhetoric, and anti-democratic demagoguery that has enabled and perpetrated the tragic insurrection in our Capitol and around the nation.

Quality education is intimately and necessarily tied to the survival of democratic institutions. The events of January 6 were a wake-up call for our nation and a challenge for educators to find ways to support our students in discussing and understanding the

meaning of this event and the long-standing dynamics that led to it. The worst thing we could do is to remain silent, and thus complicit in perpetuating the lie and ignoring the shared trauma. The curriculum materials and teaching strategies gathered here will assist you in this difficult yet essential work.

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His landmark book, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers/Multiracial Schools* (Third Edition, 2016), published by Teachers College Press, is considered a groundbreaking work examining issues of privilege, power, and the role of White leaders and educators in a multicultural society. The central focus of Gary Howard's current work, which is documented in [*We Can't Lead Where We Won't Go: An Educator's Guide to Equity*](#), is leading intensive Equity Leadership Institutes that provide educational organizations with the internal capacity to deliver high quality professional development for social justice and systemic change. <http://www.ghequityinstitute.com/>