

Eat The State!

A FORUM FOR ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN POLITICAL OPINION, RESEARCH AND HUMOR

Un-Teaching
Anti-Racism

Un-Teaching Anti-Racism

[Who Are
Our Victims?](#)

by Jeff Stevens

[Proposed
City Council
Resolution:
Withdrawal
from Iraq](#)

Education, a wise old white male once said, is "an art very difficult to impart." Among white folks living today, empirical evidence abounds aplenty to support Alfred North Whitehead's 1924 thesis in the most unfortunate way. A sterling example of such evidence presented itself recently in Seattle, when an attempt by local educators to define a certain weighty word called "racism" for the benefit of the local community resulted in a reactionary feeding frenzy in the local and national blogosphere and mainstream media.

[What Would
Gandhi
Drive?](#)

Earlier this year, Seattle Public Schools posted a set of carefully phrased definitions of racism and its various subtypes (including "active racism," "passive racism," "individual racism," "cultural racism," and "institutional racism") on its Web site, on a special "equity and race relations" page devoted to SPS's recent efforts to incorporate anti-racist education in Seattle's K-12 curricula. A certain few of these definitions were apparently not phrased carefully enough for the reactionaries in our midst, and thus provoked a flood of criticism during the month of May that forced SPS on June 1 to take down the offending site. In its place, a message was posted, written by Caprice Hollins, SPS Director of Equity & Race Relations, announcing that the site would be revised to "provide more context to readers around the work that Seattle Public Schools is doing to address institutional racism."

[Dissent in
the Tropics](#)

What was it about the original Equity & Race Relations Web page that instigated the ire of the online right (along with some noteworthy local liberals who should have known better)? The crucial provocative passage in question, defining the subtype "cultural racism," read as follows:

[Community
Radio for
Afghanistan](#)

"Those aspects of society that overtly and covertly attribute value and normality to white people and whiteness, and devalue, stereotype, and label people of color as 'other,' different, less than, or render them invisible. Examples of these norms include defining white skin tones as nude or flesh colored, having a future time orientation, emphasizing individualism as opposed to a more collective ideology, defining one form of English as standard, and identifying only Whites as great writers or composers."

[Taking the
Initiative](#)

For white folks familiar and comfortable with anti-racist activism and pedagogy, that passage likely made perfect sense as a summation of a broad body of inquiry on the topic. But of course, taken out of context, that passage's abrupt associations of racial oppression with such concepts as future time orientation, individualism vs. collectivism, and the Western canon invited convenient misinterpretation by opponents of multiculturalism and other forms of liberalism. Lo and behold, such came to pass: reactionary denizens of the blogosphere found a goldmine for fresh mockeries of liberalism in their own crude distillations of the SPS anti-racism Web page, and they ran with the Rush Limbaugh ball accordingly.

[Witnessing
the
Destruction
of Gaza](#)

Many focused in particular on the page's citing of future time orientation as a social norm that potentially factors into cultural racism. Much of the embarrassing oversimplification blooming among the bloggers predictably blasted SPS for allegedly claiming that, literally, "planning ahead is racist." In

[How Did
They Know?](#)

[From The
Kitchen](#)

[Focus On
The
Corporation](#)

[Baghdad
Burning](#)

[Eat These](#)

Shorts!BacktalkActivist
CalendarReclaim Our
HistoryNature &
PoliticsChew
Swallow
Digest

the local dead tree media, on the same day the offending SPS site was replaced, an op-ed piece appeared in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* written by Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, mocking SPS's diversity efforts on the basis of his own misinterpretation of the SPS page--again, focusing on the time orientation citation--and taking the opportunity to shill for the classic conservative agenda item "school choice." Coulson snarkastically huffed:

"Are you salting away a little money for your retirement? Trying to plan for your kids' education? If so, Seattle Public Schools seems to think you're a racist. According to [SPS's] official Web site, 'having a future time orientation' (academese for having long-term goals) is among the 'aspects of society that overtly and covertly attribute value and normality to white people and Whiteness, and devalue, stereotype and label people of color.' Huh?"

Such immature invective flowed not only in the blogosphere and local newsprint, but also into SPS's answering machines and email inboxes. SPS spokesman Peter Daniels told the *P-I* on June 1 that the district had been "dealing with calls and emails [regarding the offending Web page] for the last three weeks." Concerning the conservative confusion, Daniels told the *P-I* the original Web page "did not have enough context for people not working on this issue, and it was poorly written.... [the page was] about institutional racism, particularly in an educational setting. There are particular structures and practices in place that disadvantage other students who are not of the Caucasian or white majority. It's really examining our own practices and education, but that wasn't very clear."

One apparent mistake SPS made in drafting its definitions of racism was directly quoting, without sufficient context, an outdated textbook on multicultural pedagogy, namely, 1997's *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook*, edited by Maurianne Adams, Pat Griffin and Lee Anne Bell. SPS could have done far better by drawing on the up-to-date and ongoing work of such committed anti-racist organizations as the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (pisab.org), the Seattle-based Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites (CARW) and the University of Washington's year-old Anti-Racist White Student Union. These groups are all committed to promoting anti-racist education in Seattle and elsewhere at the grassroots level, and could likely have provided SPS with definitions of racism capable of convincing the skeptics among us, while still retaining sufficient nuance and authority.

Such skeptics might consider efforts to teach anti-racism in public schools a frivolous distraction from the three R's. But the emerging view among progressive educators is that racism remains so pervasive, and so destructive, within American society--witness all Hurricane Katrina revealed--that race merits inclusion as a subject in K-12 curricula nationwide right alongside reading, writing and arithmetic. It's all the more relevant since, as with most large urban public school districts, a majority of the children in Seattle's public schools are non-white, and "disproportionality" (the propensity of non-white students to have lower test scores, lower grades, and higher disciplinary and dropout rates) remains a major problem in the district.

The simplistic view of racism as mere bigotry remains deeply entrenched in American political discourse. We need to start teaching our young people that racism is not mere bigotry, but a socially constructed system of oppression, one that even whites who might consider themselves opposed to racism can still, however unknowingly, participate in and perpetuate. Such a sophisticated definition of racism is unfortunately bound to provoke defensive reaction, as demonstrated in last month's backlash against SPS's attempt to impart such sophistication within the local community.

Speaking of sophistication (and the unfortunate lack thereof), were the drafters of the original SPS Equity & Race Relations Web page in fact literally saying that "future time orientation is racist"? Or were they attempting to impart the notion that, when future time orientation is assumed as the norm--and other cultural constructions of time are left untaught--this can promote the sort of ethnocentrism (however innocent) that enforces collective oppressions such as racism? This is not the sort of lesson that can be taught in a mere thousand-word essay. My own experience has been that

even a ten-week college-level academic course is barely sufficient to articulate the crucial concept of the social construction of race, a concept so necessary to helping white folks--liberal and conservative alike--to understand racism as a systemic phenomenon. Such education, in order to be effective at eradicating racism from American society, should begin as early as possible--ideally at the grade school level. Is Seattle up to the challenge?

For Seattle jingoists, our fair city has claims to fame both dubious--Boeing's war machines, Paul Allen's ego--and laudable, the latter including our city government's recent national leadership in fighting global warming through sustainable development efforts. It would be yet another crowning Emerald City achievement if our public school system were to lead the way nationally in righting our country's deep-rooted racial wrongs by institutionalizing anti-racism by means of its core K-12 curricula.

It's a shame that Seattle Public Schools' recent efforts toward that goal have triggered such an ignorant and belligerent reactionary backlash, leaving anti-racism untaught for all too many of us. Here's hoping pro-diversity educators in the SPS leadership can overcome last month's unfortunate gaffe and come back swinging in the struggle for social justice by means of education. Judging from that backlash, there's still plenty of education that desperately needs doing.

[subscribe](#) / [donate](#) / [tiny print](#) / [guidelines for writers](#) / [help](#) / [index](#)

© 2006 Eat the State! All rights reserved.