

Reflections on Critical Race Theory, Race, Racism,  
Other Isms, and the Teaching of History

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- I. Critical Race Theory—Despite the concerns raised by some in the state and country, critical race theory is not a curricular issue in pre-K-12 education.

Critical race theory is in fact an academic umbrella of reflections and writings developed in higher education (colleges, universities, law schools, and graduate schools) since the mid-1970s. It is *not* a curriculum, and it is *not* a pre-K-12 curriculum. It is an academic lens or set of lenses developed primarily by those in higher education to consider the elements and impacts of racism and particularly institutional racism on our country and citizenry.

While there are certainly teachers who have read about critical race theory to inform their thinking about the world in which they live and teach, critical race theory is not a curriculum in Michigan public schools, whose local school districts are responsible for the creation of their own curricula.

- II. Race and Racism—While critical race theory is not a curriculum or, as a rule, part of a curriculum in pre-K-12 education, race and racism, integral parts of our country’s history, should most assuredly be part of a comprehensive social studies curriculum. Educators have not just the right but the responsibility to teach the breadth of our history, and this history includes race and racism. Teaching about race and racism can be and is often done within the context of developmentally appropriate teaching about well-known parts of our country’s history. It is done not to make some children feel bad and others good, or to denigrate or undermine the country, but rather to acknowledge the *fullness* and *complexity* of our history. To choose to ignore race and racism in our teaching is to efface or erase history, implicitly or explicitly, and to shortchange our children, who deserve to learn the full breadth and complexity of our extraordinary history.

- III. The U.S. Constitution—Let’s look at the U.S. Constitution, which begins “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence [sic], promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

Beautiful, powerful language. "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union...." In order to form a more perfect union.....Why would the founding fathers write in 1787, "in order to form a more perfect union"? They wrote it for at least a couple of reasons. First, they knew that they needed a stronger federal government than the Articles of Confederation, adopted in 1781, provided. Second, they knew that they were going to need to amend the very constitution that they were ratifying at that moment.

Shortly after ratification of the constitution, the founding fathers began debating proposed amendments to the very same constitution that the states had just ratified. Congress passed 12 of these amendments, and the states adopted 10 in what would be called the Bill of Rights.

The Bill of Rights contains, among others, the rights of freedoms of speech, press, assembly, religion, and petition, all part of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; the right to bear arms, the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; the prohibition against unreasonable search and seizure, the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; and the right to be free from self-incrimination, part of the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Shortly after ratification of the constitution, we began to amend the constitution. We began to improve the constitution. In the words of the constitution itself, we continued to "form a more perfect union."

How did we do this? Well, the founding fathers thought about the need for amending the constitution as they were drafting the constitution. Article V of the constitution, debated in 1787 and ultimately ratified by the states in 1789, set forth the process for amending the constitution. In other words, the founding fathers anticipated the need to amend the constitution....from the beginning.

Indeed, there have been far more than just the first 10 amendments. There have been 27 in all.

In fact, there are many ways that we as a nation work to "form a more perfect union." In addition to constitutional amendments, we have federal, state, and local laws; legal decisions; elections; public debates; education; and the exercise of First Amendment rights. In the last speech of his life, on April 3, 1968, with reference to these First Amendment freedoms, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. intoned, "Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right."

- IV. Examples of Race and Racism and Efforts to Address the Latter – Examples of the importance of race and the presence of racism in American history abound. Black Americans were enslaved for more than

200 years and subjected to Jim Crow laws for another century. Native Americans were stripped of their land, forced to relocate far from their homelands, and killed. Japanese Americans were placed into internment camps during World War II. Chinese, Jews, and Latinos were subjected to their own stigma, discrimination, and abuse. These acts went well beyond those of individual people; they were the acts of our federal government or state governments.

Over a long period of time, our country began to correct these injustices. A few examples: The 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1865, ended slavery after the Civil War. The 14<sup>th</sup> amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1868, provided that all people born or naturalized in the United States are citizens of this country and the states in which they reside. The 15<sup>th</sup> amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1870, permitted the right to vote to adult males irrespective of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court in Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education ruled that de jure segregation of blacks in school districts was unconstitutional, a decision that overturned Plessy v. Ferguson, an 1896 Supreme Court decision that had determined separate but equal accommodations on public transportation to be constitutional.

In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. The landmark civil rights law prohibits racial segregation in school districts and public accommodations, as well as employment discrimination.

In 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court in Loving v. Virginia ruled that laws banning interracial marriage violated the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment’s equal protection and due process clauses and were therefore unconstitutional. More plainly: people were legally free to marry across ethnicity, and states were NOT free to prohibit a marriage across ethnicity.

These are a few of the most noteworthy examples of progress relative to race and racism in our history. To cite Minister Theodore Parker, a 19<sup>th</sup> century cleric whose words Dr. King made better known: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

- V. Other Forms of Discrimination and Bias—There are other forms of bias and discrimination in our history. These include, but aren’t limited to, nativism, xenophobia, or anti-immigrant sentiment; sexism; anti-Semitism; anti-Asian bias; anti-Muslim bias; and homophobia. Like racism, many of these forms of bias and discrimination have waxed and waned through our history, both individually and systematically.

An example of progress: in 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court in Obergefell v. Hodges ruled that the right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples, and that prohibitions against same-sex marriage were violations of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment's equal protection and due process clauses.

- VI. An SBE Voting Example—Let me bring it home, board. In 1870, as I mentioned earlier, the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment permitted adult males the right to vote, irrespective of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Almost a century later, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, to prohibit racial discrimination in voting and to create broad voting protections.

In 1870, Louisa Swain became the first woman to vote in Wyoming, 20 years before Wyoming statehood. I have a coin that features this achievement, a gift from the Wyoming state superintendent at the recent Council of Chief State School Officers conference in Wyoming. Wyoming was the first jurisdiction in the country to permit broad voting rights for women, though there are a number of examples across the country of jurisdictions that permitted women's voting for discrete purposes or had women test their voting laws prior to 1870.

In 1920, 50 years later, the states ratified the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment to the U.S. Constitution, to give women the right to vote across the United States.

So, to bring it home, board: once upon a time, in our great country, only one of you would have been eligible to vote.

- VII. "And I needed to know"—Harvard Law School graduate and activist Randall Robinson reflected years ago about all that he had learned about our history since graduation from college and law school. He concluded that he had needed to be taught far more as a child than he had been. "And I needed to know that," he said, as he reflected upon elements of the history of our country and world that he had learned as an adult but about which he had been unaware as a child.

Likewise, our children today need to know our rich, marbled history and to consider its layers, its contradictions, its complexities. They need to know about the history that I have just shared—and much more. They need to know about Juneteenth and the Tulsa race massacre. They need to know that blacks in our country in a number of states weren't permitted to vote before the Civil War, were allowed after the Civil War, and then lost that right shortly after Reconstruction in many Southern states for close to a century thereafter. They need to know that.

The rights we hold dear can be lost. I'm reminded of the "plus jamais"—the never again—holocaust remembrance movement. We teach history so that we can learn from it: so as not to relive the tragic moments and to help continue our inexorable progress as Americans to keep building a more perfect union.

- VIII. Amanda Gorman—Like many of you, I regularly watch the inauguration of our presidents. I watched this past January and—again like many of you—was struck by recent Harvard graduate and poet Amanda Gorman, who recited "The Hill We Climb." I share two quotes from this beautiful poem. First, "just is isn't always justice." Just because something is a particular way doesn't mean that it has to be a particular way....or that this is the right way, the just way. Second, "somehow we've weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished."

To my point: we're works in progress, as individual human beings, as a nation, as a world. We have not just a right to acknowledge and share our history in this spirit as educators, but the responsibility to do so.

- IX. Race and Racism....and Our Teachers—Race and racism may be inconvenient for some, uncomfortable for others, and searing for still others, but, because they are inextricably a part of our history, they must be taught. I have confidence in our teachers to work through and teach these challenging issues to share the fullness and complexity of our history with our children....and by extension to permit our young people, armed with a knowledge of the past, to help assess the progress that we have made....and the progress that they wish to help make in their lifetimes.

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