

Education Review

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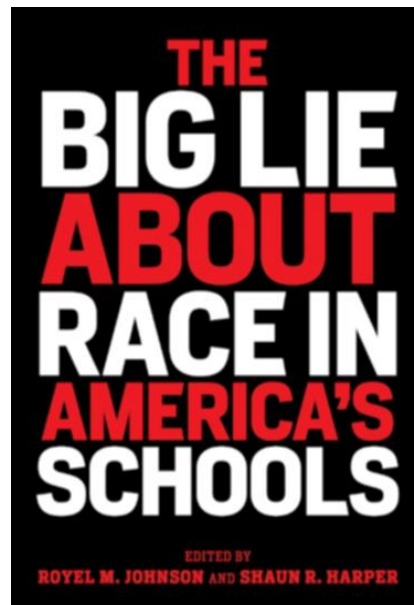
Johnson, R. M., & Harper, S. R. (Eds.). (2024). *The big lie about race in America's schools*. Harvard Education Press.

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If we permit ourselves to dig deeper into stories that seem to be admirable, we sometimes discover that beneath the admirable is a less than admirable backstory. Consider an example. I published a book in 2016 about a World War II-era, federally funded nurse training program that was remarkable for its non-discrimination policy that predated by about a decade the more noteworthy *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. However, when I dug deeper and learned about this same program from the point of view of the African American community at that time, I discovered that although there was a policy in place, it took the political pressure from African Americans to ensure that the policy was followed. Though African American enrollment increased, of the 180,000 young women enrolled in the program, even with pressure and advocacy from the African American community, only about 2,600 were African American (U.S. Public Health Service, 1950). This additional information tempered my enthusiasm. Were it not for their advocacy, I wonder how many fewer people of color would have benefitted from this remarkable program. As an educator, I continue to wonder where the truth is in similar stories. I also wonder whose truth has mattered and whose truth should matter. I have discovered that decentering whiteness and making space for perspectives beyond one's own leads to the truth. *The Big Lie about Race in Education* interested me as a casebook of the negative consequences to people of color of contemporary efforts to undo policies and practices headed in the right direction. It also interested me as a possible springboard for examining a centuries-long problem more broadly and deeply.



The Big Lie about Race in Education is part of the Harvard University Press's Race and Education series. In the series editor's introduction, H. Richard Milner IV tells of an encounter he had with a predominantly white group of parents, community members, and policy advocates, who invited him to share recommendations about ways to support minoritized communities in education. They were concerned about racial unrest, but they did not want to focus on race per se, but about poverty, economic disparities, drug addiction, and lack of opportunities for many in their community. When he finished his presentation, a participant commented that he was "playing the race card." He responded that he did play the race card. If playing the race card is needed to get at the truth, then that is what exactly should be done. To not play the race card would be providing solutions disconnected from the realness of racism and lead to suggestions and implications based on lies. Milner concludes:

This is a book for any of us committed to Truth-Telling – editors' capitalization – and confronting the big lies that can undermine a democratic citizenry where young people have a fighting chance to learn from and through curriculum and instructional practices designed to help Americans know and learn from the past and press toward a democracy for all. (p. 11)

In each of the book's 13 chapters, the authors shine light on topics that might otherwise go unnoticed by some but are very much on the minds of the people of color directly affected by the injustices they experienced as a result. The combined experiences of the contributors to this volume run the gamut on issues related to race and education, from K–12 to higher education and organizational, institutional, and instructional arrangements within schools and higher education, to environmental factors, such as policies that affect how inequities play out in educational settings.

In the first chapter, lead editor Royel Johnson points to white supremacy and a deliberate distortion and omission of America's racial history as the source of today's attacks on race and racial truth-telling in education. He provides a chronology of the evolution against critical race theory (CRT), from the launch of the *New York Times* 1619 Project, which sparked the flames for a series of attacks, and on which he elaborates further in the article. He concludes that America has a problem, but this problem is not new. He advises us to tread carefully, lest we repeat the mistakes made through the 1619 Project, which aimed to illuminate the nation's history, but instead provoked a huge backlash.

Next, Shaun Harper juxtaposes 10 truths about racial realities in K–12 schools and higher education with "one very big lie" that curricula and teaching practices are rigged to disadvantage American citizens and groom young people to hate America because it is so racist. Harper advises boldly defending the truths about racial realities in schools and society, if we care about our democracy.

The focus of John Pascarella III's chapter is on book banning as "an authoritarian tactic to prevent access to knowledge, promote social illiteracy, and legitimize misinformation that maintains pre-existing social and political orders" (p. 54). This maneuver in the United States dates to the founding. In the rest of

the article the author discusses how educators might fight book banning, and what can be done to stop it.

In Chapters 4 and 5, the authors focus on teachers and other education leaders. Erica Silva offers guidance for teachers, beginning with critical self-reflection and engagement with equity-minded professional development, engaging in educational advocacy with like-minded colleagues beyond their workplaces, and centering the truth. Francesca Lopez, Ashley Burns Nascimineto, and Elisa Serrano advise education leaders on ways to resist *The Big Lie* by dismantling manufactured fear and false narratives and replacing them with evidence-based messaging.

In Chapters 6 and 7, Jessica DeCuir-Gunby and Antonio Durán discuss the impact of *The Big Lie* in schools on Black children and queer students respectively. In the eighth chapter, Justin Coles presents a vision for the liberation of Black teachers working in suppressive school environments.

In Chapters 9 through 11, the authors offer countermeasures, response strategies, shared leadership approaches, and critical policy moves aimed at efforts that deny students access to the full truth about America's racial past and present. James Bridgeforth examines issues of power, leadership, and governance, that attend to racism and anti-Blackness in K–12 schools. Adrianna Kezar and Elizabeth Holcombe discuss shared equity leadership as a strategy for institutionalizing equity-oriented efforts in higher education. Jarrett T. Gupton employs a qualitative approach to focus on college access, equity in education, higher education policy, and academic citizenship.

Shaun Harper forecasts in Chapter 12 numerous long-term consequences of the contemporary attacks on truth-teaching, if we do not change direction:

The suppression of truth-teaching about race and racism in K–12 schools and higher education institutions will deny professionals the consciousness, knowledge, tools, and skills required to fix longstanding racial problems. Racism will surely worsen under the leadership of miseducated citizens who do not know what it is, let alone how to eradicate it through laws, policies, and practices. (p. 157)

Harper fears that short of unified, intergenerational, and interracial efforts to change direction, our nation will be left with catastrophic damage.

In the final chapter, Jaleel Howard and Tyrone Howard offer forward-thinking actions that can be undertaken to sustain pursuits of racial justice and defend democracy. They remind the reader that to avoid truth-telling threatens the quality of education for all. All students should have access to truth. Further:

The ongoing attacks on public education are a painful reminder of the power of whiteness, privilege that allows for the erasure and silencing of important aspects of the US narrative where non-white populations are concerned. Truth-telling emerges when courageous truth-tellers dare to speak truth to power (p. 173)

They call for white parents, practitioners, and researchers who disagree with these attacks on education to step up in the pursuit of truth in public education. They call for allies to use their privilege alongside people of color in their advocacy for truth.

Looking at this effort overall, several references to historical reasoning come to mind. Stanford professor Samuel Wineberg asserted that historical thinking might be a useful humanizing and truth-telling tool “to teach us what we cannot see [and] to acquaint us with the congenital blindness of our vision” (2001). David Thelen (1998) pointed out that the typical purpose of U.S. history has been to “to invent narratives and persuade peoples to interpret their personal experiences within national terms and narratives.” Giovanna Leone (2017) found that when the historical narrative is truthful, those receiving the truth are empowered by it. Young public historians whose work has challenged U.S. historical myths also come to mind. Tad Stoermer (2025) has argued that our national narrative has idealized the founding fathers and ignored the effects of that narrative on people of color from whom they stole labor and property. For centuries, this narrative has kept white people comfortable at the expense of people of color, who have experienced multigenerational trauma as a result. Getting to the bottom of this story is essential and will be difficult.

The Big Lie About Race in America's Schools makes an important contribution to knowledge about the effects of our nation's mythical history on the educational experiences of people of color. The authors have provided information that is accessible to both white people and people of color. Though the book's content might be uncomfortable for some, it is through discomfort that one learns. This book promises to help facilitate thoughtful conversations among white people and with people of color and lead to uncovering the truth about the nation's history.

Editors Johnson and Harper asked, “Are you prepared to uphold the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about race and racism?” (p. 15). They also remind the reader that the future of the nation's democracy, the integrity of its educational institutions, and racial justice in society depend on how one answers that question. This book is a good tool to prepare us not only for witnessing students and educators of color's realities, but also for engaging with, validating, and elevating their historical and contemporary experiences. Through truth-telling about the consequences of recent efforts to undo equitable educational policies and practices and countering misinformation, the authors have revealed injustice. Reading this book through a historically reasoned lens, no matter how uncomfortable it may feel, could lead us to its source and empower all of us to address injustice at its root and from an accurately informed and inclusive perspective.

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About the Reviewer

Elsie Szecszy is an emerita research professional at Arizona State University, where her research interests were on intersections between teaching, learning, and leadership, with institutional, organizational, and instructional arrangements in linguistically and culturally diverse education settings. She was involved in several documentation research projects in metro New York and metro Phoenix, Arizona, that aimed to improve Latino representation among high school and college graduates and among faculty and administrators in K-12 and higher education. Her research interests have since expanded to include humanities-based approaches to discover racial and other injustices in schools and other educational settings. Elsie holds an Ed.D. in educational administration from Teachers College, Columbia University.



About the Editors



Royel M. Johnson is an associate professor of higher education at the Rossier School of Education of the University of Southern California and is a nationally recognized scholar. His work focuses on racially and ethnically minoritized populations, including young people with foster care experience and justice-involved youth. He maintains an active program of research with more than 40 academic publications. Dr. Johnson has delivered more than 100 talks, lectures, and workshops for various audiences, embodying his commitment to connecting research

with policy and practice to improve the material conditions of underserved populations. (<https://pullias.usc.edu/team-member/royel-m-johnson/>)



Shaun R. Harper is University Professor, Provost Professor of Education, Business, and Public Policy; Clifford and Betty Allen Chair in Urban Leadership; and the University of Southern California Race and Equity Center Founder and Chief Research Scientist. He is one of the nation's most highly respected racial equity experts. His research focuses primarily on race, gender, and other dimensions of equity in educational, corporate, and policymaking contexts. He has published 13 books and over 100 other academic publications. Dr. Harper has served on President Barack Obama's My Brother's Keeper Advisory Council and on California Governor Gavin Newsom's statewide task force on higher education, racial equity, and COVID-19 recovery. (<https://rossier.usc.edu/faculty-research/directory/shaunharper>)

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