

Racism and anti-racism in twentieth-century European educational systems

Throughout the twentieth century, education in Europe has been organised around multiple, intersecting categories of social difference: class, gender, dis/ability, religion, ethnicity, and race. 'Race', a socially constructed category, is a legacy of European nation and empire building. Therefore, any understanding of racism and anti-racism in European education systems must start from the premise that these systems are embedded in, and essential functions of, much larger structures. These structures have themselves been shaped by racialized social systems arising from Europe's varied imperial, post-colonial, and totalitarian pasts.

European education systems are hugely diverse. However, the following general trajectory can be suggested: the first part of the twentieth century saw the shift towards mass, state-sponsored education in Europe based on meritocratic ideals and, generally, secular principles. However, this meritocracy very often contained assumptions based on 'scientific' racism. These assumptions were forged in Europe through the colonisation of non-European territories, where education was a 'civilising' tool weaponized to correct the perceived racial inferiorities of indigenous populations. After the Second World War, Western, democratic nation states developed a trend towards universalized mass education systems, which promoted 'equal' education. In this context of universal mass education, European nation-states were also the sites of postcolonial encounters. Immigration from outside of Europe and the redrawing of national boundaries within Europe made schools key sites of race relations, racial and ethnic conflict, and 'multiculturalism'. These postcolonial encounters called the notion of 'equal' education into question and, since the 1970s, the 'top down' discourse of equality in universal education has often been challenged by grassroots anti-racist activism.

Racism and anti-racism have rarely been treated as broad, European topics by historians and sociologists of education; they are more likely to be part of global colonial and postcolonial histories, or histories of the nation-state. In France and Britain, for example, these important themes are tied directly to the histories of Empire and decolonisation, through the relationship between colony and metropole. In German historiography, histories of anti-Semitism and Nazism have long loomed large. Helen Roche's recent study of Nazi elite schools has reinvigorated this literature by showing how the Napolas schools were integral to the wider, race-based 'Germanization' mission of the Third Reich in occupied territories, particularly the Netherlands, Polish, and Czech lands. The wider implications of Roche's argument is that the history of education is an essential way into understanding state-building and citizenship, including the maintenance and reproduction of racial ideologies.¹

¹ Helen Roche, *The Third Reich's Elite Schools: A History of the Napolas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

The situation is very different from an Eastern European perspective. Eastern Europe experience far less non-white migration in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras than Western Europe. Nonetheless, ethnic distinctions in education remained profoundly important. For example, in their study of history of education research in the Baltic states since the 1990s, Irena Stonkuvienė and Iveta Kestere note that Soviet education policies were hostile to education designed for specific ethnic minorities (for example Jews). However, this has subsequently produced an historiographical backlash, with a growing number of doctoral studies focusing on these ‘lost voices’ in Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian education.²

This short, synthesizing article focuses on Northern and Western Europe, where more work has been done on race and education for the reasons described above. Overall, three themes are identified: colonialism and racial hierarchies; immigration and postcolonial encounters, and textbooks and curricula.

1. Colonialism and racial hierarchies

Studies of European colonial education (the educational practices and policies of European states in their colonies and their attendant racial implications) are a good starting point for understanding the echoes of racial discourses ‘at home’. Indeed, colonial education policies in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century often worked to reinforce long-standing racial hierarchies between colony and metropole. Portugal, for example, established an imperial curriculum in the 1930s in its metropolitan schools with the specific aim of sustaining support for its colonial Empire. By the same measure, the rights of Portuguese citizens to an education superior to that received by indigenous Africans was also codified.³ France’s ‘civilising mission’ in Africa was powered by a centralised administrative machinery, adapted to local economic conditions, but with an emphasis on French language teaching from the early years of primary schooling.⁴ Assimilation through language was key to French colonial education, placing white, French-speaking citizens at the apex of the linguistic hierarchy. Although as Nick Harrison has recently shown in the case of Algeria, this type of colonial education could also have perverse and radicalising effects on colonial subjects.⁵ Shirin Shahrokni’s work on second-generation Maghrebi migrants educated in elite French institutions is a confirms this. Shahrokni finds

² Irena Stonkuvienė Iveta Kestere, 'From National to Global? Research on the History of Education in the Baltic States (1990–2015): Examining Doctoral Theses', *Histoire de l'éducation*, 2 (2020), pp. 75-91.

³ João Carlos Paulo, 'What Does Indigenous Education Mean? Portuguese colonial thought and the construction of ethnicity and education', *Paedagogica Historica*, 37 (2001), pp. 231-50, pp. 238-9.

⁴ Philip J. Foster Remi P. Clignet, 'French and British Colonial Education in Africa', *Comparative Education Review*, 8 (1964), pp. 191-8.

⁵ Nick Harrison, *Our Civilizing Mission: The Lessons of Colonial Education* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019).

that, in the twentieth-first century, globalisation is creating opportunities for these students to transcend the old, colonial, and racial hierarchies that have continued to define them in France. Paradoxically, their access to this global labour market is at least partly a result of their success in the very traditional French education system.⁶

Britain's colonial education policies were more diffuse and permissive across her vast Empire, with a greater and longer-lasting reliance on missionary and voluntary education. Indeed, before the First World War, the British state rarely provided any formalised mass education systems for colonised peoples.⁷ As Rachel Leow found in the case Malaysia, Britain prioritised technocratic solutions in its maintenance of colonial power over trying to standardise pre-existing education systems.⁸ Nonetheless, education at home was still used indirectly to serve the colonial project and the racial hierarchies upon which it rested. A key example of this is 'Empire Day', a celebration of imperial, Anglo-Saxon whiteness first instigated in the 'white' settler colonies of New Zealand, Australia, and Canada after the death of Queen Victoria in 1901. Up to the 1950s schoolchildren across the British Empire celebrated Empire Day, particularly in Britain before the First World War, when many children felt the celebration to be synonymous with patriotism.⁹ Empire Day was the closest the British state ever came to officially sanctioning imperial culture in domestic schools, yet imperial ideologies and images that supported racial hierarchies circulated widely in British schools until at least the 1940s.¹⁰

The very existence of colonial territories peopled by non-white populations, administered directly or indirectly by European governments, laid the foundation for racism in European education systems at home for the rest of the twentieth century. Colonial education presupposed a racial hierarchy in which white, metropolitan pupils received a superior education compared to their colonised counterparts. It also made metropolitan schools into spaces where the colonial imagination could be exercised in the pursuit of national identities and the valorisation of whiteness. The effects of this, in terms of producing racisms and anti-racist responses, were most felt in the period after 1945.

⁶ Shirin Shahrokni, 'The transnational career aspirations of France's high-achieving second-generation Maghrebi migrants', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45 (2019), pp. 437-54.

⁷ Stephen Jackson, 'Mass education and the British Empire', *History Compass*, (2021), pp. 1-12.

⁸ Rachel Leow, *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁹ J. English, 'EMPIRE DAY IN BRITAIN, 1904-1958', *The Historical Journal*, 49 (2006), pp. 247-76.

¹⁰ P. Yeandle, *Citizenship, nation, empire: the politics of history teaching, c.1870-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

2. Immigration and postcolonial encounters

Although people of African and Asian descent have lived and worked in Europe for centuries, Europe experienced widespread migration and immigration in the second half of the twentieth century. Leading up to, during, and immediately after Second World War, European migration was largely driven by displaced peoples and refugees, especially persecuted groups such as Jews and Roma peoples. But from the 1950s, labour shortages and decolonisation prompted migrating workers and families from across the globe to resettle in European countries. West Germany, for example, welcomed *gastarbeiter* from Turkey, Italy, Greece, and the former Yugoslavia between the 1950s and 1970s, and these workers made up 11 per cent of the workforce by 1974.¹¹ Britain actively recruited workers from its Caribbean colonies to fill roles in the expanding public sector from the late 1940s, a group who have become known as the ‘Windrush Generation’.¹² This trend of migrant labour eventually gave way to family reunification and, by the 1960s, a significant presence of non-white pupils in Europe’s schools. As European empires became postcolonial states, they negotiated new relationships with the peoples of their former colonies who sought to make lives for themselves in Europe.

Broadly speaking, European education systems adopted either assimilationist or multicultural policies towards non-white children in their schools. Assimilation often involves a strong emphasis on language and cultural education and avoiding any recognition of difference; France is best known for its unwavering commitment to assimilation as a foundation for a universalist notion of Republican citizenship. Britain was perhaps the earliest country to move away from this approach, through a series of government reports in the 1980s that ultimately recommend multicultural education as a viable alternative. Multicultural education aims to celebrate difference, often through curricular interventions that teach pupils about the diverse practices of other cultures. Italy, which experienced more non-white immigration from the 1970s, has shifted strongly to a policy of intercultural education since the 1990s. Intercultural education also recognises difference, but focuses on promoting dialogue and exchange between cultures. The European Union actively promotes and supports intercultural education.¹³

Surveying these policies at a macro-level tells us very little about how racism operates in education in everyday life. Moreover, as many scholars have pointed out, teachers and educationalists frequently

¹¹ W. S. G. Thomas, ‘“Gastarbeiter” in Western Germany’, *Geography* 59, 4, pp. 348-350.

¹² Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship and the Politics of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹³ Jamie A. Kowalczyk, ‘Homo pontem: teachers as bridges to a multicultural Italy’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 52 (2016), pp. 438-52.

misinterpret or contest policy recommendations from above.¹⁴ Despite policy ideals, ‘civilising’ narratives formed under colonialism did not disappear, they were reworked and renegotiated in these new, postcolonial contexts. The classroom, the playground, and the school bus are all sites where these renegotiations took place at the micro-level. Black and brown children and their parents often bore the brunt of long-standing racialised stereotypes in European societies that mirrored colonial ideologies. In this way, not all non-white races faced the same discrimination. In Britain, for example, different expectations were placed on African-Caribbean and South Asian children, with the latter typically treated as more academically able, especially in science and mathematics. East Asian children, from China and Hong Kong, meanwhile, were characterised as a ‘model minority’ and considered to be more passive in educational settings.¹⁵ Despite the vastly different structures and aims of the British and French postwar education systems, everyday racisms turned on remarkably similar discourses in the 1960s and 1970s. Felix Germain’s study of African and Caribbean migrants in postwar Paris suggests that children of African mothers faced harsher racism than their counterparts from the *Antilles françaises*.¹⁶

How did communities of colour respond to the varied forms of racism in education? Much new work in black British history has focused on this question. In British cities, grassroots, anti-racist responses were favoured over state-sanctioned ‘multicultural’ policies by black and brown families. In the 1960s and 1970s, African-Caribbean communities responded to the marginalisation of their children in mainstream schooling by establishing black ‘Supplementary Schools’, which taught black history and culture and promoted boosting pupil self-esteem in the face of racism on the streets and in the schoolyard.¹⁷ It took a long time for these community initiatives to be recognised by the educational administration, and this happened only in a fleeting and decentralised fashion. For example, after 1983, all schools in inner London were bound to have their own anti-racist and anti-sexist policies, but this was met with much hostility and opposition, including from white teachers.¹⁸

Indeed, teachers were very often at heart of postcolonial encounters in schools, although we have less knowledge of how black teachers confronted racial difference. E. R. Braithwaite’s 1959 autobiographical novel *To Sir, With Love* explores his experiences as a black, middle-class teacher from Guyana teaching white working-class pupils in a London secondary school. Like the sprinkling of other black teachers from the Caribbean, Braithwaite found his identity as a professional and

¹⁴ Laura Tisdall, *A Progressive Education? How childhood changed in mid-twentieth-century English and Welsh schools* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

¹⁵ Department of Education and Science, *Education for all (The Swann Report)*, (London, 1985).

¹⁶ Felix Germain, *Decolonizing the Republic: African and Caribbean Migrants in Postwar Paris, 1946-1974* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2016).

¹⁷ Rob Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964-1985* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

¹⁸ Amy Gower and Laura Carter, ‘Historicising anti-racist and anti-sexist education: the case of the Inner London Education Authority in the 1980s’, forthcoming.

highly-educated man compromised by regular, casual racism in the classroom and staffroom.¹⁹ Fabien Deshayes and Axel Pohn-Weidinger's detailed case study of Aimée Jean-Baptiste, a black Guadeloupean primary-school teacher who arrived in metropolitan France in the 1950s points to a similar clashing of hierarchies. Jean-Baptiste was subject to racialised stereotyping from the administration, pupils, and parents, who saw her as deserving of 'extra patience' due to her skin colour. However, this was coupled with a Republican commitment to her right to work in the French public system as a citizen of a *département d'outre-mer*.²⁰ In both cases, assimilation was based on the assumption that these middle-class black individuals were completely qualified to teach in predominantly white school systems. But this logic was compromised by long-standing cultural attitudes towards blackness.

Not all inter-racial encounters in European education systems were postcolonial encounters. The experiences of one small but significant group of children in postwar Europe highlights this: children of white, European mothers fathered by African-American soldiers. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of African-American GIs deployed to Europe after the United States entered the Second World War in 1941 introduced communities to sustained and intensive contact with people of African descent for the very first time. In wartime Britain and postwar, occupied West Germany, inter-racial relationships between these soldiers and white women frequently generated racist backlash.²¹ The thousands of mixed-race children that resulted from these relations provoked racial anxieties in Europe. Both countries sought to integrate these 'brown babies', although new research has documented their ongoing experiences of racism in the care system, school system, and communities.²² In West Germany, the entry of some c.94,000 Afro-German children into the public school system in the early 1950s was used falteringly used as an opportunity to launch a campaign to re-educate the German public on race relations.²³

3. Textbooks and curricula

Historians have paid particular attention to the role of school textbooks and curricula in constructing racial ideologies in European education. It is widely acknowledged that racist depictions of African and Asian peoples were commonly found in classrooms across Europe in the first half of the twentieth

¹⁹ E. R. Braithwaite, *To Sir, With Love* (London: 1959).

²⁰ Fabien Deshayes and Axel Pohn-Weidinger, 'The experience of a primary-school teacher from the French Caribbean on arrival in metropolitan France (1950-1960)', *Clio. Women, Gender, History*, 50 (2019), pp. 179-88.

²¹ Maria Hohn, *GIs and Fräuleins* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

²² Lucy Bland, *Britain's 'brown babies': The stories of children born to black GIs and white women in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

²³ Sabine Lee, 'A Forgotten Legacy of the Second World War: GI children in post-war Britain and Germany', *Contemporary European History*, 20 (2011), pp. 157-81.

century. This is particularly true in the teaching of history and geography. For example, Pascal Clerc finds that the geography textbooks used in French schools up to the 1960s were highly complicit in the colonial project and contained negative, homogenizing representations of Arab, Asian, and African populations.²⁴ In Britain, this trend has been traced back to late-nineteenth century ‘readers’, used to teach primary-school age children how to read, which were mobilised to construct and transmit ideas about the superiority of the English ‘race’.²⁵

Analysing school resources to understand attitudes to race has its limitations. It is always difficult to establish how pupils and teachers responded to discourses; did they passively absorb them, or did they actively question them? Focusing on a more recent period, Maria Luce Sijpenhof’s work on anti-black racism in the Netherlands since the 1960s has helpfully combined textbook analysis with interviews with teachers and pupils. She found a predominance ‘colour-blind racism’ in discourses of race in Dutch education since the 1960s, a persistent textual and semantic strategy that allows race to be dodged or denied in the context of schools and teaching, despite documented experiences of everyday racism by pupils of colour. Sijpenhof concludes that race and racism function as a ‘conspiracy of silence’ in Dutch education.²⁶

Perhaps because of these ambiguities and silences surrounding race and Europe’s colonial pasts, since the 1990s Holocaust education has instead become a major vehicle for opposing racism in European school curricula. In January 2000 Sweden hosted an International Forum on the Holocaust with forty-six governments represented, which led to the ‘Stockholm Declaration’, a shared commitment to Holocaust commemoration and education.²⁷ Since then, the European Union has strengthened its commitment to Holocaust education through research and indirect funding. A clear recent focus has been to use Holocaust education to teach children and young people about anti-Semitism and racism, and to link this to the European Union’s wider anti-Semitism strategy. Holocaust education is a compulsory aspect of the national curriculum in England and Germany. Furthermore, a 2020 study showed that teaching about the Holocaust is widespread in European countries, although countries including Greece, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia, and Finland do not teach about the Roma and Sinti genocides.²⁸

²⁴ Pascal Clerc, ‘La formation d’un regard: la colonisation dans les manuels de géographie du secondaire (1873-1951)’, *Histoire de l’éducation*, 155 (2021), pp. 197-217.

²⁵ S. J. Heathorn, *For home, country, and race: constructing gender, class, and Englishness in the elementary school, 1880-1914* (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

²⁶ Maria Luce Sijpenhof, ‘A transformation of racist discourse? Colour-blind racism and biological racism in Dutch secondary schooling (1968–2017)’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 56 (2020), pp. 51-69.

²⁷ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, ‘Holocaust Education’ [<https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/education>], accessed 1 April 2022.

²⁸ Magdalena Pasikowska-Schnass, ‘European Parliament Briefing: Holocaust Education’, January 2021 [[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/679059/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)679059_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/679059/EPRS_BRI(2021)679059_EN.pdf)], accessed 1 April 2022; European Agency for Fundamental Rights, ‘Excursion to the past – teaching for the

As with all policy and top-down perspectives, these overviews require further interrogation at the school and classroom level. In her study of Holocaust education in England and France, for example, Heather Mann has stressed the role of teachers' own subjectivities and family histories in shaping how they have taught pupils about the Holocaust.²⁹ In Spanish high school textbooks meanwhile, Mariano González-Delgado found that the term 'racism' was unproblematically deployed to describe Nazi actors, without efforts to deconstruct the varied meanings and uses of the term.³⁰

In the twenty-first century, education systems in Europe largely seek to provide equal educational opportunities to pupils, regardless of race. Yet most European education systems are also faced with battling structural inequalities in education that are the direct result of decades of accumulated racism and discrimination. In schools and in society more broadly, Europe is also increasingly being forced to confront the weight of its own past. This means teaching national and imperial histories that acknowledge racism, whether in the form of European anti-Semitism or colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean. This has proved more controversial and problematic than, for example, teaching the history of black civil rights in the USA. European education is now embroiled in a stubborn 'culture war' around these issues, with the left calling for a 'decolonisation' of curricula, and the right attempting to whitewash imperial pasts. In 2005, for example, France attempted to pass a law that would require school curricula to stress the positive role of France overseas, whilst in 2010 the Conservative UK government called for a return to history teaching based upon a more patriotic, 'island story'. Most recently in 2020, Hungary's Viktor Orbán attempted to implement a national curriculum that included nationalist and anti-Semitic authors. Despite decades of work by educationists, communities, and activists, confronting race and racism remains one of the most urgent issues in European education.

future: Handbook for teachers', 2010 [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/1218-Handbook-teachers-holocaust-education_EN.pdf], accessed 1 April 2022.

²⁹ Heather Mann, 'Holocaust memory and its mediation by teachers: a study of England and France (1987-2018)', unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2021.

³⁰ Mariano González-Delgado, 'The treatment of the Holocaust in high school history textbooks: a case study from Spain', *History of Education*, 46 (2017), pp. 810-25.