The Southern Poverty Law Center's "Learning for Justice" Standards: A Critique

Many learning standards and materials relating to racial and ethnic differences in American society highlight important, helpful attention to previously untold stories and unrecognized injustices while also introducing intellectually suspect, one-sided, and potentially harmful approaches to analyzing these stories. These are often referred to in terms of Critical Race Theory (CRT).

There is currently much misunderstanding and disagreement about CRT, in part because CRT isn't what it used to be. In its origin, CRT was a tool for analyzing the ways in which anti-black racism operated within our cultural and legal institutions. It aimed toward the elimination of racism. In this early incarnation, CRT was similar to the analysis of race relations in the U.S. offered at times by Abraham Lincoln, Alexis de Tocqueville, or James Madison—all of whom worried openly about the cultural and institutional entanglements of African American enslavement and their long-term repercussions. Many scholars who use CRT in their work continue to conceive of it generally in these original terms.

In recent months, however, CRT has become something very different in popular discourse. "CRT" is used today to refer to a much deeper set of intellectual and political ideas. **Today, CRT refers not only to analysis of systemic racism, but also to a rejection of the foundations of all systems implicated, however tangentially, with racist practices. In a distorted version of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous statement about injustice, racism anywhere is indicative of racism everywhere.** The argument is that because many of the people who explored the philosophical foundations of humanity and built political institutions on these foundations in the past were themselves racist, these philosophical foundations and political institutions must be rejected wholesale.

This new, radicalized version of CRT rejects, in particular, two crucial interrelated principles: (1) the existence of objective truth; and (2) the existence of a common human nature. The rejection of (1) eliminates the possibility of constructive dialogue and leaves only power relations. The rejection of (2) eliminates the possibility of human personality and leaves only group identities.

The purpose of the following detailed analysis of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Learning for Justice standards is to show the ways in which these broader and deeper commitments of the new CRT characteristically emerge in currently available educational materials. For a complementary analysis of the problematic consequences of the new CRT approach, please see the FAIR public comment on the U.S. Department of Education proposed priorities.

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ABOUT THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER

The Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Montgomery, Alabama, is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) civil rights organization founded in 1971 and dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of society. It neither endorses political candidates nor engages in electioneering activities.

ABOUT TEACHING TOLERANCE Founded in 1991, Teaching Tolerance is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center dedicated to helping teachers and schools prepare children and youth to be active participants in a diverse democracy The program provides free educational materials including film kits, scripted lessons and a tool that allows educators to build their own learning plans. Teaching Tolerance magazine is sent to more than 450,000 educators, reaching nearly every school in the country. More than 7,000 schools participate in the annual Mix It Up at Lunch Day program. Teaching Tolerance materials have won two Oscars®, an Emmy® and dozens of REVERE Awards from the Association of American Publishers, including three Golden Lamps, the industry's highest honor. The program's website and social media pages offer thought-provoking news, conversation and support for educators who care about diversity, equal opportunity, and respect for differences in schools.

The use of the term "hate" in this context broadly reflects postmodern philosophy's and Critical Race Theory's rejection of the distinction between intellectual opinion and emotional response. This is parallel to the rejection of the distinction between objective truth and subjective truth—"The Truth" vs. "my truth."

FAIR shares the goal of seeking justice for the most vulnerable.

The reference to democracy without the modifiers "American" or "Constitutional" is part of a broader pattern the reflects CRT's rejection of American ideas and institutions.

References to "diversity" without complementary references to "unity" reflect that this approach is uncomfortable with the national motto of our country, *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one).

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Introducing Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Standards, a road map for anti-bias education at every grade level.

The Social Justice Standards are a set of anchor standards and age-appropriate learning outcomes divided into four domains—Identity, Diversity, Justice and Action (IDJA). The standards provide a common language and organizational structure: Teachers can use them to guide curriculum development, and administrators can use them to make schools more just, equitable and safe. The standards are leveled for every stage of K–12 education and include school-based scenarios to show what anti-bias attitudes and behavior may look like in the classroom. Teaching about IDJA allows educators to engage a range of anti-bias, multicultural and social justice issues. This continuum of engagement is unique among social justice teaching materials, which tend to focus on one of two areas: either reducing prejudice or advocating collective action. Prejudice reduction seeks to minimize conflict and generally focuses on changing the attitudes and behaviors of a dominant group.

References to "anti-" without complementary references to what an education or policy is "in favor of" reflects an ideology that focuses on destroying systems of oppression. This ideology lacks the constructive resources to express a positive vision.

FAIR agrees that justice should be promoted in schools and society at large.

The word "equitable" is commonly understood to mean fair and equal, but within the CRT ideological framework, equitable can also mean equality of outcomes, which ignores students as unique and individual learners.

In this context, "safety" can serve as a substitute for the ideas of respect or civility. "Safe" monologues replace sometimes uncomfortable dialogues.

"Social justice" can be used to express the idea that justice exists primarily at the level of the group, rather than at the level of the individual. In this way it can aim to refocus attention towards abstractions of race and/or society, to the exclusion of the level of an individual's humanity.

This phrasing reflects CRT's approach to civic engagement, which is action undertaken in a vacuum. Without attention to the wider objective contexts of ideas and institutions that sustain political communities, "collective action" can be harmful rather than beneficial.

FAIR agrees that reducing prejudice is an important step on the way to recognizing our shared humanity.

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Collective action challenges inequality directly by raising consciousness and focusing on improving conditions for under-represented groups. The standards recognize that, in today's diverse classrooms, students need knowledge and skills related to both prejudice reduction and collective action. Educators can use the Social Justice Standards as the basis for building custom learning plans on tolerance.org. Free registration is required.

"Raising consciousness" is a phrase closely associated with Karl Marx's social and historical analysis. In its current incarnation, "consciousness" refers to an awareness ("wokeness") of systemic injustices against people due of their perceived identity group. This concept reflects a neglect of individual human dignity and agency.

Identity

1. Students will develop positive social identities based on their membership in multiple groups in society.

"Social identities" reflects the downplaying or eliminating of the significance of individual identity development, which is a fundamental part of being human.

2.Students will develop language and historical and cultural knowledge that affirm and accurately describe their membership in multiple identity groups.

FAIR agrees that fostering historical and cultural knowledge is a key component of understanding humanity.

The idea of "membership in multiple identity groups" signifies an emphasis on socially constructed factors in identity formation, which neglects the significance of shared human nature as well as the uniqueness of every human being.

3. Students will recognize that people's multiple identities interact and create unique and complex individuals.

4. Students will express pride, confidence and healthy self-esteem without denying the value and dignity of other people.

FAIR agrees that individuals are unique and complex, but questions the idea that individuals are created only by their group identity, an idea that denies common human nature.

5. Students will recognize traits of the dominant culture, their home culture and other cultures and understand how they negotiate their own identity in multiple spaces.

This is a valuable goal, which FAIR supports.

The reference to "negotiating identity in space" reflects the ideological pervasiveness of immutable group belonging in every aspect of human life. This kind of belonging is, though, only a single part of the complex human experience.

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Diversity

6. Students will express comfort with people who are both similar to and different from them and engage respectfully with all people.

FAIR supports this goal.

7. Students will develop language and knowledge to accurately and respectfully describe how people (including themselves) are both similar to and different from each other and others in their identity groups.

If the sentence had ended here, this would be a good statement of a valuable goal.

By including "and others in their identity groups," this sentence reflects the reductionist idea that people are constituted solely by the sum or intersection of their immutable identity groups. This idea runs counter to the notion that people are individual members of humanity, with a common human nature that makes them who they are at a more fundamental level.

8. Students will respectfully express curiosity about the history and lived experiences of others and will exchange ideas and beliefs in an open-minded way.

Though potentially a neutral concept, "lived" experiences are an alternative to shared or common experiences, and thus serve as principles of division rather than principles of unity. The concept overly emphasizes the subjective nature of experience.

This goal aligns with FAIR's principle of fostering understanding.

9. Students will respond to diversity by building empathy, respect, understanding and connection.

This goal aligns with FAIR's principle of understanding.

10. Students will examine diversity in social, cultural, political and historical contexts rather than in ways that are superficial or oversimplified.

FAIR supports this goal. Rather than engaging in stereotyping or the flattening of people into various identity groups, FAIR encourages the appreciation of everyone's unique identity in a nuanced, complex, and more complete way.

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Justice

11. Students will recognize stereotypes and relate to people as individuals rather than representatives of groups.

FAIR supports this goal.

12. Students will recognize unfairness on the individual level (e.g., biased speech) and injustice at the institutional or systemic level (e.g., discrimination).

FAIR supports this goal.

FAIR supports the investigation of institutional or systemic injustice. Dogmatic and oversimplified assertions of systemic injustice are, however, potentially problematic.

13. Students will analyze the harmful impact of bias and injustice on the world, historically and today.

The is an important task, if presented in a balanced way that also recognizes the beneficial impacts of humanity and justice on the world, historically and today.

14. Students will recognize that power and privilege influence relationships on interpersonal, intergroup and institutional levels and consider how they have been affected by those dynamics.

This sentence reflects the regressive idea that all human relationships—with one other and with the world in general—are reducible to power dynamics.

15. Students will identify figures, groups, events and a variety of strategies and philosophies relevant to the history of social justice around the world.

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Action

16. Students will express empathy when people are excluded or mistreated because of their identities and concern when they themselves experience bias.

17. Students will recognize their own responsibility to stand up to exclusion, prejudice and injustice.

18. Students will speak up with courage and respect when they or someone else has been hurt or wronged by bias.

19. Students will make principled decisions about when and how to take a stand against bias and injustice in their everyday lives and will do so despite negative peer or group pressure.

20. Students will plan and carry out collective action against bias and injustice in the world and will evaluate what strategies are most effective.

Expressing empathy is a natural outgrowth of understanding and appreciating shared humanity, which FAIR supports.

Like "identity groups," "identities" when used in the plural as it is here shows the influence of the CRT denial of a more fundamental level of human identity in which all human beings share.

FAIR supports this goal in particular as reflecting the importance of taking principled, informed, and deliberate action against injustice. Standing against injustice is different from other forms of political activism.

This phrasing reflects CRT's approach to civic engagement, which is action undertaken in a vacuum. Without attention to the wider objective contexts of ideas and institutions that sustain political communities, "collective action" can be harmful rather than beneficial.

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Identity 1 ID.K-2.1 I know and like who I am and can talk about my family and myself and name some of my group identities.

Identity 2 ID.K-2.2 I can talk about interesting and healthy ways that some people who share my group identities live their lives.

Identity 3 ID.K-2.3 I know that all my group identities are part of me—but that I am always ALL me.

Diversity 7 DI.K-2.7 I can describe some ways that I am similar to and different from people who share my identities and those who have other identities.

Justice 11 JU.K-2.11 I know my friends have many identities, but they are always still just themselves.

This is a valuable goal that FAIR supports.

At this early grade, this focus on possessed "identities" engrains in students the idea that human life is inescapably created by socially constructed groupings. This concept works against an appreciation of human nature or common humanity.

Justice 13 JU.K-2.13 I know some true stories about how people have been treated badly because of their group identities, and I don't like it.

The idea that group identities are formed primarily by oppression stems from examples such as the African American experience, which witnessed the creation of the socially constructed category of "black" to justify and enforce slavery, discrimination, and racism. But universalizing this idea leaves no room for a complementary treatment of positive identity formation.

Identity 1 ID.3-5.1 I know and like who I am and can talk about my family and myself and describe our various group identities.

Identity 2 ID.3-5.2 I know about my family history and culture and about current and past contributions of people in my main identity groups.

Identity 3 ID.3-5.3 I know that all my group identities are part of who I am, but none of them fully describes me and this is true for other people too.

Identity 4 ID.3-5.4 I can feel good about my identity without making someone else feel badly about who they are.

These follow in the pattern of the corresponding learning outcomes in the K-2 section.

Diversity 7 DI.3-5.7 I have accurate, respectful words to describe how I am similar to and different from people who share my identities and those who have other identities.

The idea of "accurate" and "respectful" words reflects the regressive idea that language is inextricably tied to racist beliefs and practices. Proponents of this view see words as weapons because language is a product only of power relations (rather than being also expressive of potentially true ideas and opinions).

Justice 13 JU.3-5.13 I know that words, behaviors, rules and laws that treat people unfairly based on their group identities cause real harm.

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Justice 14 JU.3-5.14 I know that life is easier for some people and harder for others based on who they are and where they were born.

Human beings are not neatly divided into a "life-is-easier" group and a "life-is-harder" group. This oversimplification of the human experience reflects reductionism and a binary lens.

Identity 1 ID.6-8.1 I know and like who I am and can comfortably talk about my family and myself and describe our various group identities.

These follow in the pattern of the corresponding learning outcomes in the earlier sections.

Identity 2 ID.6-8.2 I know about my family history and culture and how I am connected to the collective history and culture of other people in my identity groups.

This is a clear statement of the regressive idea that individual human identity is composed solely of intersecting group identities. This statement denies the idea that human nature — which all human beings share — is part of what gives someone a unique identity or personality.

Identity 3 ID.6-8.3 I know that overlapping identities combine to make me who I am and that none of my group identities on their own fully defines me or any other person

Identity 4 ID.6-8.4 I feel good about my many identities and know they don't make me better than people with other identities.

This is a valuable recognition of the uniqueness of every human being, which FAIR supports.

Diversity 7 DI.6-8.7 I can accurately and respectfully describe ways that people (including myself) are similar to and different from each other and others in their identity groups.

FAIR agrees that people are both similar to and different from one another, but the emphasis on group identities continues here, without any mention of potentially balancing concepts of human nature or humanity.

Diversity 10 DI.6-8.10 I can explain how the way groups of people are treated today, and the way they have been treated in the past, shapes their group identity and culture.

The emphasis on group identities continues here, reflecting the view that such identities are formed exclusively through oppression by the dominant culture.

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Identity 2 ID.9-12.2 I know my family history and cultural background and can describe how my own identity is informed and shaped by my membership in multiple identity groups.

Identity 3 ID.9-12.3 I know that all my group identities and the intersection of those identities create unique aspects of who I am and that this is true for other people too.

Identity 4 ID.9-12.4 I express pride and confidence in my identity without perceiving or treating anyone else as inferior.

Identity 5 ID.9-12.5 I recognize traits of the dominant culture, my home culture, and other cultures, and I am conscious of how I express my identity as I move between those spaces.

This concept of "spaces" reflects the position that racism is not limited only to individual behavior, legal systems, and language, but even pervades physical space itself. This leave no "room" for a common ground defined by shared humanity and understanding.

Diversity 10 DI.9-12.10 I understand that diversity includes the impact of unequal power relations on the development of group identities and cultures.

As in similar instances above, this reflects the idea that group identities are formed exclusively through oppression by the dominant culture. This also reinforces the lens of power relations as the only influence on the development of human societies.

Justice 14 JU.9-12.14 I am aware of the advantages and disadvantages I have in society because of my membership in different identity groups, and I know how this has affected my life.

This statement combines (1) the reduction of human beings into intersections of identities, with (2) the oversimplified analysis of human society exclusively in terms of power.

Action 20 AC.9-12.20 I will join with diverse people to plan and carry out collective action against exclusion, prejudice and discrimination, and we will be thoughtful and creative in our actions in order to achieve our goals.

As above, this phrasing reflects an approach to civic engagement that is action undertaken in a vacuum. "Collective action" suggests conformity of focus without attention to the wider objective contexts of political communities.