

Claims of being 'color blind' implies race does not matter, leads to unequal education, professor says

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America's society and education system have a tendency to claim they are "color blind" or that they don't see race. Doing so tells young people their race and identity don't matter, encourages ignorance and ultimately leads to poorer education for all, a University of Kansas professor argues in a new article.

Color blindness should instead be labeled "color evasiveness" to more accurately reflect that people are simply avoiding substantive discussion or acknowledgment of race, Subini Annamma, assistant professor of special [education](#) at KU, argues in an article in the journal *Race, Ethnicity and Education*. She co-authored the piece with Darrell Jackson of the University of Wyoming and Deb Morrison of the University of Washington.

There are numerous problems with claims to color blindness, and the authors argue that labeling it correctly is a first and important step in addressing it.

"When you choose to be 'color blind' you've made an active choice," Annamma said. "There's a paradox there, if you say you're not going to see color, you've already acknowledged it."

The authors examine both educational and legal ideology that has led to a proliferation of color blindness as well as scholarship that challenges that

ideal. Supreme Court Justice John Harlan wrote in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision, "Our constitution is colorblind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of [civil rights](#), all citizens are equal before the law." But while he was arguing all should have access to civil rights, many have interpreted it to mean race should be ignored. Justice Clarence Thomas continues to make arguments that government should never acknowledge race, which has become the basis for U.S. anti-discrimination law, the authors write.

Color-blind ideology has also found its way into education, with teachers, teacher education programs and policy makers all embracing the idea that race should not be considered when educating young people. Even if such an approach is well-intentioned, it suppresses students' identities, supports racism and leads to unequal education for all students.

"When we say 'I don't see color,' what we're saying is 'I see you as white.' White becomes the default," Annamma said. "We also see a lot of scholarship in education that doesn't want to talk about race but does want to talk about racial outcomes. People want to talk about racial disparities in education and unequal outcomes but often don't want to talk about the racial experiences that led to those outcomes."

By ignoring race, scholars are willfully tuning out information that could be vital in addressing inequities. By preparing future teachers to embrace a color-blind ideology, [teacher education programs](#) are producing teachers who will not be able to address questions of race in their classrooms and ignore vital components of students' identity, Annamma said. For example, teachers who ignore race cannot have honest discussions with students about current events such as Native Americans' role in the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, African-Americans' experiences with police brutality or similar occurrences. It also does a disservice to white students by ignoring that everyone has racialized

experiences in life. Ultimately, it leads to poorer education for all students and [young people](#) who are not prepared to deal with questions of race they will undoubtedly encounter in their lives.

Additionally, the idea of color blindness in terms of race is insulting in terms of disability. Suggesting one can choose to be blind both implies passivity and incorrectly labels blindness.

"It associates blindness with ignorance. It's an inadequate descriptor and also implies passivity," Annamma said.

Suggesting color blindness in society and education is also simply ignoring reality, the authors argue. One can suggest that race has no part in either, but doing so would be to ignore decades of evidence such as unequal educational outcomes and harsher sentencing for people of color.

"When you look at the justice system, which is supposed to be race neutral, you see [racial disparities](#) in every step of the process," Annamma said. "No matter how color blind you try to be, it can't be done. You're simply evading race."

The authors call for scholars and educators to abandon the idea of color blindness and consider how embracing the philosophy impedes the advancement of racial justice, finding solutions to persistent educational problems and to realize how avoiding a problem can perpetuate it.

"We challenge all critical scholars to think deeply about the power in defining the active avoidance of [race](#) as color-blindness, what that racial ideology constrains in their analysis and how the expanded racial ideology of color evasiveness allows them to develop their conceptualizations, critiques and solutions," the authors wrote. "The shift to color evasiveness allows for both comprehensively situating the

conceptualization and critique of [color blindness](#) as well as thoughtfully considering how to move the underlying ideology forward expansively."

More information: Subini Ancy Annamma et al. Conceptualizing color-evasiveness: using dis/ability critical race theory to expand a color-blind racial ideology in education and society, *Race Ethnicity and Education* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2016.1248837](https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1248837)

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