



# MYTHS ABOUT POLLYANNA

Pollyanna has not been immune from the impact of the rising tide of misinformation we've seen dominating our national conversation in the past two years, particularly around the role of race and racism in education. Not only has our work been mischaracterized, but we've been called "divisive" and "dangerous."

Though we would rather spend time positively advancing our work, it is sometimes necessary to publicly rebut and refute claims that are both untrue and detrimental to our mission. We firmly believe that Pollyanna's work in schools and organizations contributes to environments that are more just, equitable, and in which every community member feels safe and belongs, able to be the most authentic version of themselves.

We've picked four of the most common myths that we have heard from opponents of our work and have highlighted them here.

**These myths threaten to undo our work, so we must undo them.**

## MYTH #1 THE POLLYANNA CURRICULUM IS COMPROMISING ACADEMIC RIGOR IN OUR SCHOOLS.

Pollyanna does not drive the mission or program at any school. Rather, we support the school's DEIB mission and program through training and resources. The Racial Literacy Curriculum is standalone, meaning that it is not intended to revise or replace any existing piece of the school's curriculum. Rather, it is intended to supplement existing curricula and--given its content--may invite teachers to reconsider or expand how they teach history and literary arts. The Racial Literacy curriculum is meant, in fact, to intensify the rigor of traditional academic programs.

Research suggests that there are real benefits for students to fostering classroom spaces in which diversity of all kinds are welcome. And in situations where racial and cultural diversity is lacking in a classroom, it is all the more important that teachers proactively bring into the classroom perspectives and insights that students might not otherwise encounter or entertain. The research is clear:

- A study in *Psychological Science* reports that students exposed to other students who are different from them, and the novel ideas and diverse perspectives such exposure brings, tend to have improved cognitive skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving.

- A recent report by the [Century Foundation](#) suggests that diverse classrooms “better prepare students for life, work, and leadership in a more global economy by fostering leaders who are creative, collaborative, and able to navigate deftly in dynamic, multicultural environments.”
- A [brief](#) filed by nearly half of the *Fortune 100* companies, including Apple, Johnson & Johnson, and Starbucks, argued employees entering the workforce needed to have “experience in sharing ideas, experiences, viewpoints, and approaches with diverse groups of people ... such cross-cultural skills are a ‘business and economic imperative.’”

The point here is that students who encounter and wrestle with diverse experiences are better equipped to enter a demanding workforce where emotional intelligence, cultural humility, and cross-identity engagement are necessary for success.

Why would we actively turn children away from acquiring this crucial skill set?

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## **MYTH #2      THE POLLYANNA RACIAL LITERACY CURRICULUM IS INAPPROPRIATE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN.**

Anyone who has spent more than five minutes with young children knows they are astoundingly perceptive, observant, and curious about themselves and the world around them. What does the research say about when children begin to consider and learn about racial identity?

- Infants are able to nonverbally categorize people by race and gender at six months of age. (Katz and Kofkin, 1997)
- Toddlers as young as two years use racial categories to reason about people’s behaviors (Hirschfeld, 2008) and choose playmates. (Katz & Kofkin, 1997)
- Children not only recognize race from a very young age but also develop racial biases by ages 3 to 5 (Aboud, 2008). For example, one study showed that children ages 3 to 5 in a racially and ethnically diverse daycare center used racial categories to identify themselves and others, to include or exclude children from activities, and to negotiate power in their own social/play networks.

Clearly learning about race isn’t much of a choice for our children. Society begins socializing us into racial understandings in much the same way as it socializes us into our roles in the family — as daughters, sons, nonbinary children, sisters, brothers, siblings, and the list goes on. Rather than steering children away from conversations about identity, research suggests there are benefits to doing the opposite:

- Explicit conversations with 5 to 6-year-olds, about interracial friendships proved to dramatically improve racial attitudes (Bronson & Merryman, 2009)

- Open, honest, frequent, and age-appropriate conversation about race, racial differences, and even racial inequity and racism is associated with lower levels of bias in children (Katz, 2003)

So, the choice is clear: Do we continue buying into the “they’re too young to talk about race” myth? Such a choice would leave learning about race to our society and all of its mixed messages. Not talking about race is itself a kind of racial perspective, an ideology that would leave our children ill-equipped to navigate a society increasing in both racial diversity and racial conflict.

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### **MYTH #3                      POLLYANNA IS TEACHING WHITE CHILDREN TO FEEL BADLY ABOUT THEMSELVES.**

This myth sadly–yet powerfully–resonates among opponents of racial literacy education. Their narrative suggests that, if white children are educated using a social and racial justice lens, they will spiral uncontrollably into a vortex of negative self-esteem from which they will never recover. This permanently damaging experience in school will lead them to underperform, lead less productive lives, and ultimately be “replaced” by people of color. The entire social order of the United States will be upended. Chaos will ensue.

Will all this horror really result from a more racially equitable and justice-centered approach to education?

Of course, it won’t.

A well-rounded education that includes racial literacy benefits everyone, including white students. A strong racial literacy curriculum promotes the following, for all students:

1. A set of K-12 academic and social-emotional skills, appropriately scaffolded, to support holistic development as an intelligent and compassionate individual.
2. Critical thinking to support the accurate retelling of U.S. history that includes the complex history of race, racism, and cultural and aesthetic creativity.
3. Historical and literary empathy to understand the experiences and views of historical and literary figures, which can be applied in real life.
4. Analytical skills to support identifying structures and practices of racial inequality and bad ideas that assign inferiority to some and superiority to others.
5. Investigative skills to seek out stories of people of all racial backgrounds who were changemakers and who sought a truer democracy and to seek out the diverse ways that racism has negatively impacted people of all races.
6. Practicing empathy, compassion, and openness with one another as we have these conversations.
7. Demonstrating racial and cultural literacy in interacting with people across lines of difference.
8. Taking action as leaders to promote diversity, belonging, and truer democracy for all.

Pollyanna’s work benefits children of all identities, including children who identify as white. White children also deserve to live in a more racially just and equitable world. We do not believe that working to create this world in our communities demeans, belittles, or marginalizes white children. To believe this would be to subscribe to an ugly brand of “either/or” thinking that smacks of the damaging and conspiratorial replacement theory embraced by white supremacists. Rather, we firmly believe the work of racial literacy lifts up white children, helps them develop a positive identity, and asks them to think about the contributions they might make in creating a more just and equitable world. Racial literacy can and should be a hugely positive and necessary piece of a well-rounded education for all children—including those who are white.

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## **MYTH #4 POLLYANNA IS DIVIDING OUR COMMUNITIES.**

Fear of discussing racial identity and racism is deeply embedded in our culture. For years, many of us, particularly white folks, have been conditioned to be “color-blind”, as if ignoring race and racism would somehow make the problems they cause disappear on their own. This approach is akin to receiving a cancer diagnosis and, rather than seeking the most appropriate and effective treatment, deciding that the best approach is to “just not think about it.”

James Baldwin famously undoes this myth when he wrote: “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” While community conversations about the intersections of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging can be challenging and difficult to navigate, we firmly believe that approaching them with courage, humility, and appropriate norms is the only way forward. We cannot address that which plagues us if we are unable to discuss what the cure might look like. It is not Pollyanna or race talk more broadly that divides us—rather, what divides us is our failure to examine and discuss race in nuanced and compassionate ways.

So much of Pollyanna’s programming is geared towards helping individuals and communities build capacity to face that which needs to be changed. This includes:

**Assessments** – Pollyanna offers Community Assessments, and Curriculum Assessments that collect and synthesize feedback pertaining to inclusivity, along with the guidance needed to implement systemic change.

**Racial Literacy Workshops** – Pollyanna’s workshops engage with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives and enhance racial literacy knowledge and equity practices. We work to give communities the tools to accomplish their goals.

And, introducing... **MaPaGa + Me - The ABCs of Race-Conscious Parenting**: A new 4-part workshop for parents/guardians/grandparents of children four years and younger.

**As always, we are grateful for your support. Let’s leave myths in their proper place and move forward together in this vital work.**

*This paper was written and edited by Jason Craige Harris, Pollyanna Consultant, and Jay Golon, Program Designer and Facilitator.*