

SPECIAL INTEREST ARTICLE

Dismantling Barriers to Anti-Racist Education

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Abstract

Teachers desiring to address inequity within education must acknowledge the inconsistencies experienced by students who belong to historically marginalized or oppressed communities. Anti-racist education addresses conventions rooted in systemic or structural racism, colourblindness, and implicit bias, creating an environment that facilitates equity in education for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, or culture.

Anti-racist education acknowledges the inequalities experienced by people who do not implicitly benefit from current world systems, purposing to bridge that gap. This includes people who have been historically oppressed or marginalized because of race, ethnicity, or culture. In order to facilitate anti-racist education, teachers must be willing to accept that some of the significant traditions historically synonymous with education and simple existence, such as systemic and structural racism, colourblindness, and implicit bias, must be challenged in order to facilitate equitable education for all.

Systemic and Structural Racism

History is typically told from the perspective of the victor, and the current education system follows that same pattern. Eurocentric ideologies at the centre of educational frameworks determining students' learning at all levels (Abdulle et al., 2017) fail to account for all other racial and cultural ideologies represented in the society that same framework is presumed to serve. Forest et al. (2016) identified this conduct and its suggested application within educational systems as a barrier to educational achievement for racialized students. The omission of non-Eurocentric ideologies within educational frameworks sends the message that other cultural perspectives are not important.

Canada's continued identity as a multicultural nation is threatened when protected by educational policies that do not address the uncomfortable side of race and culture. Educational frameworks celebrating cultural diversity without addressing the realities of racial inequality are only superficial policies (George et al., 2020). These realities include the disproportionate number of racialized students who are labelled "at risk" or classified as and moved into special education centres without appropriate evaluations. Adjei (2018) referred to this "institutional disregard" as a way that policies, practices, and politics of the system are structured, failing racialized people by leaving them helpless within their own communities and rendering them as intruders in these environments (pp. 4-5). Students who experience this institutional disregard will inevitably believe that they have been betrayed and, in that context of distrust, will struggle to experience success.

Addressing issues rooted in history and tradition is a challenge. The educational system has always been an important key to growth and change, but on further review presents its own obstacles in facilitating growth and change for all people. George et al. (2020) highlighted that official school curricula "mutes, distorts, omits, and stereotypes the perspectives of racialized [people]" (p. 3), additionally suggesting teaching methodologies that are "individualistic, colourblind, and race-neutral" (p. 3). In a society that is so racially and culturally diverse and relies heavily on a strong educational system to guide and enlighten all minds, curricula should reflect the societies they serve.

Data are used as a significant instrument to measure success in schools. Carter et al. (2017) encouraged having conversations with students in order to determine whose needs are being met and whose needs are not, because examining schools' habits surrounding the practices implemented within schools is crucial, and then using the data to inform teachers of the disparities found between

racialized and non-racialized students is a useful tool to counter those issues. Asking students about their needs amplifies their voices and allows space for an education that is suited to their needs. Discussions surrounding race and cultural issues within schools provides space to set right the injustices that pervade the current systems.

Providing all students with an equitable and inclusive education attacks the inequalities within a system that has historically been beneficial for some. Equitable and inclusive education supports all levels of diversity, including “ancestry, culture, ethnicity . . . language . . . race, and religion” (George et al., 2020, p. 11). Considering the students in my classroom and using a pre-existing tool intended to motivate students to work on their annotation skills in English, I created a resource comprised of articles, poetry, and song lyrics that were either written by or centred around Black and Indigenous people. Students who identified as Indigenous excitedly thumbed through their booklets, instantly identifying with much of the content. Students who identified as non-Indigenous expressed keen interest in the content, commenting on its potential to initiate meaningful discussions. Students were able to make connections to themes and experiences that would otherwise be overlooked or dismissed.

As representatives of educational systems, teachers have the responsibility and power to use knowledge and experience as a tool to motivate their students in the direction of growth. Acknowledging that schools are important spaces to combat racism in addition to being spaces for democratic discourse allows teachers to facilitate discussions with students that would otherwise be difficult, challenging racism within educational systems (Arneback & Englund, 2020; Forrest et al., 2016). Many students desire to discuss issues surrounding race and culture and these conversations are subject to their teachers’ willingness to address those issues.

Colourblindness

Anti-racist education can be very difficult to approach, and may be uncomfortable to address within the education system and the classroom when specifically dealing with issues surrounding race and ethnicity. When broached, a common default approach for teachers is colourblindness: choosing not to acknowledge the racial differences amongst their racialized students (Husband, 2016). Phrases such as “I don’t see colour” create an environment of invisibility for folks who identify as Black, Indigenous, or as People of Colour, which is characterized by race or ethnicity. Being seen is crucial to being known, and the practice of colourblindness impedes that process. Teachers who minimize racialized students’ identities by refusing to acknowledge their students’ race and ethnicity may unwittingly employ colourblindness as a tool, perpetuating racial inequality (Burke, 2017). Appropriately addressing students’ needs requires full acknowledgement of their uniqueness.

Addressing issues of race and ethnicity amongst teachers as it pertains to their classroom culture may also create further challenges when colourblindness is used as evidence of racial equality. Burke (2017) noted that a common system of belief carried by many is that colourblindness is a reputable trait, touted as tolerance among people who embrace diversity as an opportunity to enhance their own lives, but it fails to assist in breaking down structures that continue to marginalize racialized people. Creating spaces that encourage the idea that racial and cultural inequalities are minimal, or even non-existent, places teachers in difficult situations when the need to address those same issues arises. Husband (2016) asserted that the neutrality of colourblindness leads only to negative results for both educators and students, while Newton and Soltani (2017) explained that colourblindness erases the reality of privilege within the dominant culture, minimizing the lived experiences of racialized people. Teachers have a responsibility to reach students where they are and encourage them to grow as learners and individuals; however, if colourblind practices are utilized by teachers within school settings, all students cannot be reached and encouraged, thus hindering their growth.

Successful anti-racist education within school settings employs equitable practices, which acknowledge the reality of race and exposes the actuality of the lived experiences of all peoples: Black, Indigenous, People of Colour, and White, while teachers recognize that all people experience life differently and accept that “power and privilege” is afforded to those who are White, but that “pain

and suffering” is the burden of many Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (Newton & Soltani, 2017, p. 98). This acknowledgment opens the door to honest conversations, providing much needed perspective into how the world is experienced by others. When asked to share my perspective following a fatal incident involving race with other educators, one colleague who proudly professed racial colourblindness, admitted in shock the realization of the reality of my lived experience as a Black woman. The ensuing discussion created a space of awareness for the educators whose lived experiences did not mirror my own, providing an opportunity to appreciate the stories that students could potentially share in a similar space.

Implicit Bias

Teachers—as all people—have their own preference for, and ideas about, many things. These preferences and ideas include how their classroom should function and how the students within those classrooms should behave. Important to anti-racist education, but often overlooked, is the recognition that these expectations are often fueled by teachers’ own implicit biases. Specifically addressing teachers’ expectations of students, implicit bias is identified as subconscious associations connected to racialized people, which includes teachers’ ideas of their students’ potential, teachers’ interpretation of students’ value, and determining their students’ integrity (Carter et al., 2017; Suttie, 2016). Discriminatory behaviour toward students is often fueled by implicit biases held by teachers, because the brain unconsciously carries “old biases and preferences” toward various racial and ethnic groups (Carter et al., p. 9). Teachers who refuse to address their own teaching practices while choosing to blame racialized students for their own lack of success are evidence of devaluing students (McKamey, 2020). Teachers with unchecked biases create a foundation for unfair judgement calls, often producing negative results for students.

I had a personal experience with a young racialized student I happened upon, collapsed in the middle of the school hallway in obvious pain, evidenced by the intensity of the wailing. I observed two teachers assigned to supervise the hallways at that time, peering around the wall watching this student in anguish, choosing not to offer aid. Additionally, after making myself available to this student, meeting her on the ground, her teacher came out of the classroom and instructed me to leave the student alone, citing reasons such as cell phone use in the classroom. In a very brief but highly charged exchange, I informed the teacher that a student in need deserves support and I proceeded to assist her as the teacher, uninterested, returned to the classroom. After a few moments on the ground, assuring the student that I truly cared for her safety, she divulged that a family member had contacted her while in class to inform her that a loved one had been found murdered. After enlisting the help of another staff member equipped to handle the next steps, I went back to the classroom teacher to follow up on the incident. After further conversation, the classroom teacher informed me that the student should not have been in the school in the first place because she was labelled as problematic and our school was not looking to house students of that nature. Teachers carry a great deal of power and authority in their classrooms, which when mishandled can cause a great deal of damage. Husband (2016) regarded teachers’ low expectations of racialized students as a by-product of high levels of implicit bias; therefore, it is essential for teachers to regularly perform personal inventory of their beliefs.

During my undergrad as a music student, it was common practice for potential short-term employers to offer short-term paid singing jobs to vocal students; however, one instructor had the power to disseminate this information to singers of his choosing even though he knew and worked with only a small number of vocal students. In my final year, the instructor approached me for the very first time with an opportunity of which he did not have a high opinion, but articulated that he felt it was well suited for me even though he was unfamiliar with me. As a member of an incredibly small racialized population in the school at that time, it felt less like an opportunity and more like a low-class compromise. Posting every opportunity in a public space without prejudice would have provided all students an equal opportunity to choose their success, rather than their opportunities being chosen for them. Observing and facilitating an environment for change is often challenging, especially when the

change required is internal. Teachers who choose to confront and replace their initial biases and low expectations of students from racially diverse backgrounds ensure that those students have access to more equitable academic outcomes and opportunities (Husband, 2016). Students with more opportunities experience higher levels of success.

Conclusion

Anti-racist education as a tool for equitable education bridges the gap between those who have been historically oppressed or marginalized because of race, ethnicity, or culture. Challenging barriers such as systemic and structural racism, colourblindness, and implicit bias creates opportunities for success for all students regardless of their race, ethnicity, or culture.

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About the Author

Sonya Williams is in the Master of Education program at Brandon University, with a focus on administration and leadership. Most of her teaching career has been spent in various middle and senior years music settings, and the ELA classroom. Kickboxing is one of her favourite pastimes.