

# RACISM: A HIDDEN CURRICULUM<sup>1</sup>



**R**acism is an uncomfortable word, perhaps because we like to believe that it has never been an issue in Canada. A few years ago, an article in an independent student newspaper asked: "Did you know that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were thousands of KKK members in Canada? At the same time, did you know that it was a crime for Chinese restaurant owners to hire white women? Think racism is not an issue? Think again."<sup>2</sup>

Certainly racism is a part of our past. In her exceptional book *Colour Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada 1900-1950*, Constance Blackhouse provides a history of Canadian law in which non-whites have experienced systemic racism in the Canadian justice system.<sup>3</sup> The book details appalling cases of racism, dispelling the image of Canada as a nation free of racial prejudice.

In fact, Canada has a long history of hate-motivated violence towards racial or ethnic minorities. Violence against Aboriginals has continued from the time of conquest; Japanese-Canadians were interned and their property confiscated during World War II; in the 1970s a series of subway attacks was aimed against members of Toronto's South Asian Community; and anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic attacks based on religion have long been prevalent in Canada, often despite 'white privilege'. Race and ethnicity, combined with religion, have been the basis for attacks against Jews, Muslims and Sikhs. Blackhouse warns that racism and inequality continue at great risk: 'colour-blindness' (pretending that racism does not exist), she argues, will maintain white advantage.

In our contemporary world, racism is a pervasive and destructive social force both in Canada and internationally, and it is on the rise since 9/11. Newspapers and *YouTube* provide a wide array of examples demonstrating both the current existence of racism – some perpetrated by police – and its detrimental effects on Canada's inhabitants. However, the parameters of concepts such as ethnicity, race, gender and class are subject to change in space and time.

In fact, the concept of race implies more than physical differences: meanings and definitions of racial categories can and have changed through history. For example, in contemporary Canada racism is seen as discrimination directed mainly against non-white people, but this was not always the case: in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Eastern Europeans were seen as a different race and ethnicity from Anglo-Saxons. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people of African descent and Asians have occupied that category.

## CLARIFYING CONCEPTS

What then, is racism? Although most of us think we know the answer to that question, we certainly do not all understand it in the same way. So, I would like to start with a discussion of a number of related concepts which, as abstract social categories, can be interpreted differently. I will then show how the implications of these constructs reveal themselves, overtly or covertly, in educational settings through the hidden curriculum and act to maintain a discriminatory



**EN BREF** Le mot racisme dérange, peut-être parce que nous aimerions croire qu'il n'a jamais joué un rôle important au Canada. En fait, l'histoire du Canada est jonchée de cas de violence contre les minorités raciales et ethniques. Bien que le racisme ait essentiellement été éradiqué des programmes scolaires structurés au Canada, les écoles reflètent les déséquilibres de pouvoir et l'environnement social général. Mais le curriculum dissimulé, enseigné de façon informelle, est plus destructif et insidieux. Le racisme est souvent invisible pour les enseignants et les administrateurs jusqu'à ce qu'il surgisse lors d'incidents. Comme les préjugés et la discrimination sont issus de la socialisation et que l'école joue un important rôle dans la socialisation de l'enfant, l'éducation peut servir à prévenir le racisme.

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learning environment. Finally, I will explore the role of education in combating racism.

**Race.** We talk about race and races of people, but all human beings are members of one species: homosapiens. So, what does 'race difference' mean?

With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century, it has become clear that human populations are not clearly demarcated into biologically distinct groups. Genetic analysis indicates that there is greater variation within 'racial' groups than between them. About 94 percent of physical variation lies *within* so-called racial groups, whereas conventional geographic 'racial' groupings differ from one another in only about 6 percent of their genes. Race, then, is a socially created concept for classifying people, ostensibly based on visible physical *differences* (e.g. skin colour, facial features, hair texture) and increasingly, on religious symbols.

While race does not have scientific validity, we must not underestimate its power as a social construct to affect people's lived experiences, their daily lives as well as their futures. Race is a very real concept in our social consciousness, and it has real world consequences.

**Racism.** While race is constructed on the basis of physical criteria, ethnicity is based on cultural criteria (language, customs, religion, history, etc.). Discrimination based on either race or ethnicity is racism.

Racism is not a matter of cultural differences and misunderstandings; it is a matter of political power.<sup>4</sup> It is the implementation of classifications, which – directly or indirectly – work to preserve power structures and privileges, which are themselves based on changing axes of control. The resulting imbalance of power is the most destructive element of racism because racism can only be exercised by people in power.

Racism (the act) is based on the belief that the inherent *differences* among people (due to assumed racial or ethnic characteristics) determine cultural or individual achievement.

Social definitions of race and our understandings of 'racial categories' and the 'reasons' for their victimization change through history and vary from culture to culture. As contemporary biologists tell us, there are no races, only

racists.<sup>5</sup> For example, it may surprise some people in North America that geneticists consider people from the Middle East and northern India, as well as those from Northern Europe, to be Caucasians; it is culture and history that divide us, not genetics.<sup>6</sup>

**Discrimination.** Discrimination is an act (intentional or not) that results in denying or granting individuals or groups opportunities or social rewards on the basis of group characteristics such as skin colour, ethnicity, sex, class, religion, sexual orientation and language. It is usually based on prejudice or pre-judgment, which is often influenced by culturally developed stereotypes and socially constructed images rather than by evidence. Prejudice is the belief; discrimination is the action. We need to distinguish racial prejudice (belief) from racism (act) because actions involve power. Racism, sexism, classism and homophobia are all forms of discrimination based on differential power.

**Difference.** Discrimination is violence based on *differences*. Some differences are scientifically insignificant but make a big difference socially. For example, skin colour, facial features, dress, and language can each have a dramatic impact on an individual's lived experiences. So then, what is 'difference'? Difference is that which distinguishes one thing from another; it is not an indication of inferiority. Difference can also be understood as that which is not in the image of the dominant group in terms of characteristics identified as being of another race or ethnicity from one's own. Difference translates into unequal power by creating the 'other' from arbitrary factors. The 'other' is never just there – it is always created.

To understand the nature of difference we must ask: Different from whom? Different in what way? Different for whom? Why do certain small differences make such a big difference in opportunities and life chances? Understanding the answers to these questions will help to elucidate both the causes and effects of difference in our society.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

The school is a microcosm of society, and a racist society will exhibit power struggles in school. Globalization and the changing goals in education have added to institutional

and individual competitiveness, which increases violence and is facilitated by technology (cyberbullying).

Canada has one of the earliest multicultural policies in the world. As products of contemporary times in the Canadian context, very few Canadian teachers are blatantly racist. Furthermore, racist and sexist materials have largely been removed from formal curricula, although the problem of Eurocentric educational systems across Canada does produce racist effects, largely through textbooks' non-recognition and mis-recognition of the contribution of groups of people.

However, simply changing curricula and policy is insufficient because the problem is embedded in the social consciousness. More destructive and insidious than the formal curriculum is the 'hidden' curriculum. Educational discourse (language and practice) perpetuates racism in subtle ways. (John Dewey explored the hidden curriculum in his early 20<sup>th</sup> century works, particularly in his classic *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916.) The hidden curriculum refers to the socialization process in schooling – a curriculum that is taught without being formally ascribed. It emanates from social, political and cultural environments of the society and must be understood in relation to the overall societal power structures (of ethnicity, class, and gender for example) that influence the education system. Therefore, the effects of the hidden curriculum are not casual or unsystematic but rather a reflection of the socio-cultural and economic-political structure of society.

Similarly, teachers' roles in shaping the educational experiences of students and influencing their life chances must be understood through their own socialization and values within the social structure. Often teachers, perhaps inadvertently, exacerbate existing power inequities by reinforcing social attitudes through their own prejudices and stereotypical assumptions about student capabilities and cultural behavior. Low expectations, for example, are likely to result in self-fulfilling prophecies. Such unconscious assumptions, often based on racism, cannot be ignored or excused because of the enormous impact they have on a student's life. Teachers must be made aware of the subtle ways in which they empower or disadvantage different students; the initial step in teaching must be to examine one's own values.

A second step is to learn to teach the curriculum critically. Uncritical teaching leads to the maintenance of the existing ideology. For example, multicultural education is often translated into 'tolerance of others' – supposedly a democratic value. However, acceptance of others, not mere tolerance, is what is to be truly desired. Similarly, failing to recognize Canada's racist history and portraying a race-less and colour-blind society condones and continues white privilege (white racism). In education, we cannot be fair to all citizens by being colour-blind because Canadian society is not colour-blind; it privileges certain ethnic groups. Fairness, not colour blindness, is a fundamental principle of justice.<sup>8</sup> Fairness is not equal treatment but equality of opportunity: it is to recognize difference without allowing it to categorize people.

Racism is often invisible to teachers and administrators until it erupts in specific incidents. But failing to recognize and acknowledge racism perpetuates inequality and unequal relations. Given their shrinking resources and,

more often than not, their lack of training in handling this serious problem, teachers have different ways of coping with racism in the classroom, ranging from ignoring different expressions of racism to dealing with them on an individual basis

### RACISM IN SCHOOL

Racism is violence because it violates the integrity of the other. We tend to think of violence in terms of guns, bombs and war, but it can take on several forms, and each of these forms can and does take place in schools, sometimes as a result of the hidden curriculum. They include social isolation, bullying, ostracization, physical violence and even murder. These types of violence may no longer be as overt as they were in the past, but they still exist and they are no less painful.

Types of Violence	Description
Verbal abuse	derogatory labeling or name calling
Non-recognition	rendering people invisible or irrelevant
Physical	beating, shooting
Emotional/psychological	diminishing another person in any form because of his or her identity, origin, ethnicity, culture
Cyberbullying	harassment/threats over the computer

It is essential for educators to ensure that the school environment is not only safe but also conducive to learning, free of hurtful experiences or fear. Cooperative learning groups and a variety of active learning strategies using multi-sensory methods can help tremendously in crossing borders.

Violent attitudes, actions and environments lead to a construction of the 'other' by producing social separation between dominant and subordinate groups. The damage to the victim is both material and emotional/psychological. Literature on identity construction shows how victims of oppression begin to believe the negative identification that the oppressor instills through prejudice and discrimination.<sup>9</sup> Freire points out that oppressed people internalize the dominant class discourse and start believing in their own inferiority.<sup>10</sup> This low self-esteem and lack of confidence has drastically damaging effects and limits students' opportunities.

### ANTI-RACIST EDUCATION

Since prejudice and discrimination are a result of socialization, and the school plays an important part in the socialization of the child, education is a vehicle that can be used to prevent racism. We need to redefine and rethink what is good education and schooling. Anti-racist education, critical multiculturalism and feminist education are paradigms that advocate very similar prescriptions for education. The first step is to acknowledge that inequalities and racism exist. Education needs systematic examination of and opposition to racial/gender/class stereotypes that reaffirm social inequities. It should be based on the assumption that any system or practice that discriminates against specific groups or individuals on the basis of their difference from the dominant group (in power) is unacceptable. Further-



more, the discriminating system or practice needs radical change at all levels: structural/institutional, individual and philosophical.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to inquiry, critical questioning and discovery, the educational system should incorporate multiple perspectives and different ways of knowing and learning. As an immigrant country in a globalized world, Canada needs to be cosmopolitan and transcultural. Education leads to knowledge, and knowledge requires respect for others and otherness. Therefore, education is the gateway for opening ourselves to a reality larger than our immediate environment. Transcultural networks will be essential because today's youth form heterogeneous groups that cannot easily be ethnically defined; they represent multiple cultural histories and creatively integrate various ways of negotiating intergenerational as well as intercultural challenges.

The paradigms also suggest the implementation of the three C's: care, concern, connection.<sup>12</sup> That is to say, we need to present knowledge in ways that concern students, ways that have personal meaning and importance. We need to emphasize the importance of connecting content, attitudes, skills and values. Finally, we need to instill a caring attitude if we are to attain and maintain a peaceful society. This is especially true when identity formation takes place in a world that inherently forms boundaries and divides people. Caring can bridge that divide.

## CONCLUSION

In a transcultural, cosmopolitan world we need to broaden our concepts of education and schooling. This can be accomplished, in part, by extending the goals of education in several ways. We need to better prepare students for the world of work; we need to focus on their emotional development to nurture cultural wealth and a healthy inner being; and most importantly, we need to motivate them to create a civil society. Education is a moral endeavour, and educators must strive for social justice. However, we cannot expect the school alone to transform the culture of education. We live in a culture that emphasizes power, money and prestige. The practices of divisiveness and oppression have been normalized in society. This does not mean, however, that the school has no agency. School and the rest of society need to work together towards the human ideal of a more just, violence-free and interdependent world. |




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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** For a discussion of the importance of confronting issues of race and exclusion in public policy debates, see the article by Penny Milton in this issue.

### Notes

- 1 This article is adapted from a presentation at the conference Global Fest 07: Calgary's Commitment to Ending Racism (10 October 2007).
- 2 Yu Wei Gao, "Author Challenges Racism," *e. Peak* (SFU Independent Student Newspaper), 19 February 2001.
- 3 Constance Backhouse, *Colour Coded; A Legal History of Racism in Canada 1900-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).
- 4 K.A. Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, eds. K.A. Appiah and A. Gutman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1996).
- 5 K.A. Appiah, *In My Father's House* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- 6 "Genomics in Society," *Genomics Education*, BC, Dec. 2004.
- 7 Ratna Ghosh (2002) *Redefining Multicultural Education*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Toronto: Nelson Thomas Learning, 2002).
- 8 Appiah, 1996.
- 9 S. Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity" in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, eds. A. McClintock, A. Mufti and E. Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Ratna Ghosh and A. Abdi, (2004) *Education and the Politics of Difference: Canadian Perspectives* (Toronto: Canadian Press, 2004).
- 10 P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970).
- 11 Ghosh, 2002.
- 12 N. Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).


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