

# **Dismantling Racism in Schools through Anti-Oppressive Frameworks: The Pivotal Role of Leadership in Achieving Racial Equity**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores how human rights, decolonization, and anti-racist education converge in combatting systemic racism, bias, and discrimination in K-8 schooling. The goal is not to embed human rights as a standalone framework, but to align human rights principles with ongoing decolonizing and anti-racist work. Educational institutions and school leaders have a moral, ethical, and legal responsibility to those they serve and lead. The onus must be placed on educational leaders to first, examine their own racial location and identity; second, be aware of their power and privilege, and; third, understand how this power, privilege, and bias shapes and impacts attitudes, beliefs, and decision-making. Without a fundamental understanding of one's biases and knowledge gaps, leaders cannot adequately identify and eliminate racism, racial discrimination and inequities in schools. To move from theory to practice, this paper concludes with tangible strategies and tools for leaders to begin dialogues and processes for change. This paper is based on a theoretical research plan developed for the York University Graduate Students in Education Conference. In the future, this conceptual paper will inform the development of a research project, at which stage, the methodology will be solidified, the theoretical frameworks more firmly grounded, and implications for leadership policy and practice discussed.

**Keywords:** *Systemic discrimination, human rights, anti-racism, decolonization, leadership*

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## **Background**

Systemic discrimination operates at individual, institutional, and societal levels. It also dominates political and policymaking spheres, thereby creating gross injustices. The legacy of colonialism in Canada and North America more broadly is reflected in the continued presence of structural racism in educational practices (Lopez, 2020). Colonization is a major part of Canada's history. Because colonization is present in day-to-day systems and institutions, not addressing it hinders the ability to make change and further perpetuates marginalization. We must be aware of the events of the past in order to address contemporary manifestations of racial discrimination, racism, and coloniality in present day. Lateisha Ugwuegbula (2020), working with Elders and Knowledge Holders from Manitoba, articulates the role of education in perpetuating racism and white supremacy in schooling, and is particularly critical of Eurocentric curriculum: "schools continue to position Western education as the centre of legitimate knowledge, and any other knowledge as insignificant. Eurocentric curriculums teach Black and Indigenous students that their lives and the lives of their ancestors are not worth learning about" (Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness. 2022). By excluding already marginalized students through omitting their epistemologies and ontologies, we are contributing to further social marginalization, impacting self-esteem and senses of belonging and identity, student engagement, and academic performance.

## **Research Problem and Rationale**

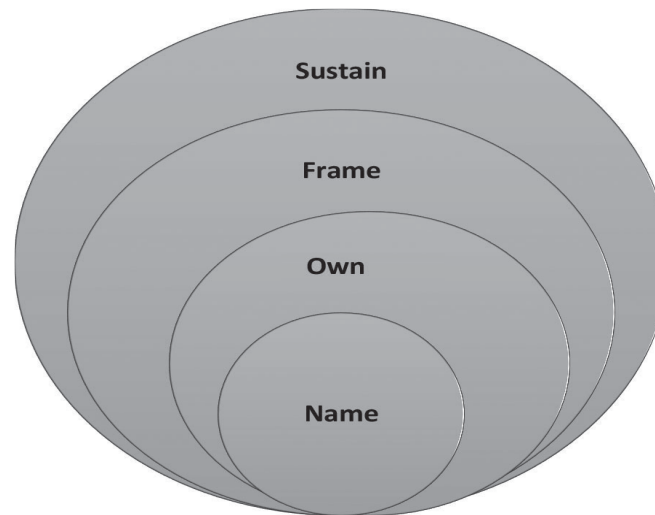
In this paper, I interrogate systemic racism in K-8 schools through exploring the continued perpetuation of injustices derived from coloniality, both within educational systems and in the colonization of the mind. By this, I refer to the long and persistent content and messaging inherently connected to education through systems and social structures that facilitate

the dissemination of colonial narratives. I unpack these considerations in the following ways: (a) I emphasize the growing need and importance of including non-dominant knowledge in curriculum, pedagogy, and instruction; (b) I explore the critical role of leaders in effectuating change; (c) I highlight the urgency of understanding and incorporating human rights principles into classrooms at the elementary school level; and (d) I offer strategies for achieving sustainable education for all students. By bringing this challenging and complex topic to the forefront, it is my intention to demonstrate that educational stakeholders should meet their obligations and responsibilities in upholding human rights in schools. Through this paper, and through my future dissertation research, I intend to empower educational stakeholders to recognize their obligations and responsibilities to uphold human rights in K-8 schools.

### **State of Public Education**

I was recently interviewed by the journal *Social Science Space* for my work on anti-racist leadership. I spoke about how the horrific misconduct and gross negligence toward George Floyd sparked a global uproar in the fight against racism, bringing to light the deeply entrenched systemic racist practices that are prevalent in systems and structures. As a racialized woman raising racialized children, I think about the impact of racism on identity, mattering and belonging, as well as student academic performance and outcomes. Educational institutions have a responsibility to address and eliminate racism from educational policy, curricula, assessment and evaluation practices, as well as daily school activities. Equally, school leaders have a moral, ethical, and legal obligation to those they serve and lead. The onus must be placed first and foremost on educational leaders to engage in critical self-reflection, which necessarily includes examining their own racial location and identity, and understanding their power and privilege (Social Science Space, 2021).

This diagram from Lopez and Jean-Marie (2021) depicts a framework for addressing racism in schools – or at least a starting point for educational leaders and practitioners. It helps to visually understand the steps required for leaders to effectively combat racism in schools.



**Diagram 1: Framework for addressing racism in schools (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021, p. 58)**

Lopez and Jean-Marie posit a framework for action that educational leaders can employ as they challenge anti-Black racism in everyday practice. In **naming** racism or other acts of hate, we come to understand how racism manifests in everyday schooling practices. In **owning** the issue, the educator's positionality comes to play in terms of how they position themselves, where they are active, and how they are complicit. In **framing**, educators must be intentional and purposeful in their actions and must look for spaces in their work to actively challenge anti-Black racism, such as in curriculum development, pedagogy, assessment and evaluation practices, and student discipline. To reach its desired impact in combatting anti-racism, anti-racist work must be **sustained**. This requires collaborative mentorship, developing and deepening critical understanding of anti-Black racism, finding space and time to dialogue, sharing resources, and engaging in ongoing reflection and agency (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021, p. 60). This process is important for educators to use individually or collectively

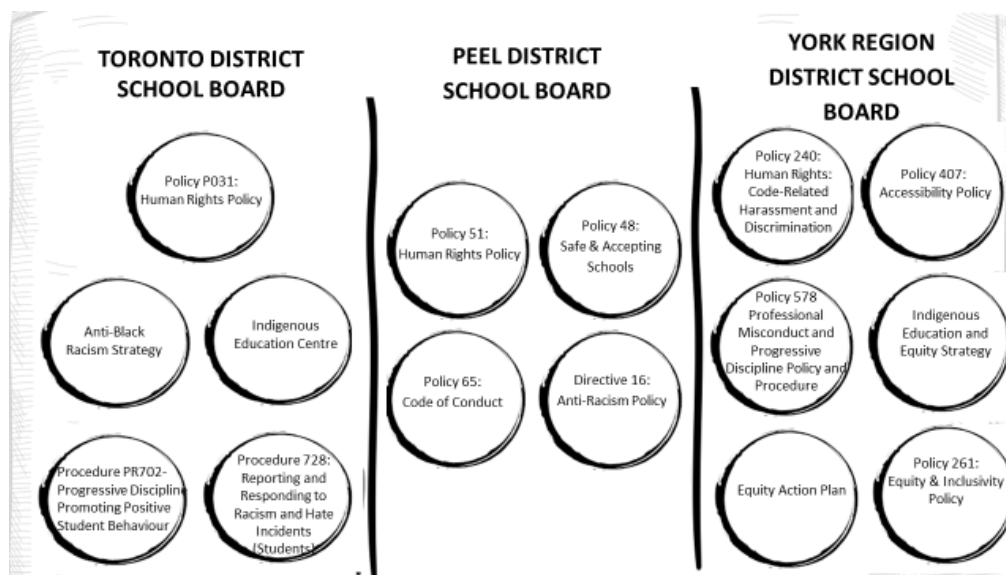
in order to bring about system-wide change. I include this framework because the marginalization of students through anti-racist practices cannot be left up to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts alone. (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021, p. 58).

### School Board Policies

Below is a snapshot of three of Ontario's largest school boards, illustrating extensive policies and protocols developed to combat discrimination in schools. I question, how much do students know about these policies? How much do staff know? How much do school board administrators, principals, and teachers engage with these policies? Who holds them accountable for implementing these policies?

Some additional questions to consider include:

- Does the organization have systems and processes in place to ensure that policy requirements are met?
- Do all stakeholders know their responsibilities with respect to administering and utilizing the policies?
- How is the organization ensuring ongoing compliance with the policies? (adapted from Hudson et al., 2019).



**Diagram 2: Three Ontario School Boards Anti-Oppressive Policies & Procedures**

In my role as Human Rights Officer at the York Region District School Board (YRDSB), I conduct consultations and investigations addressing matters of harassment and discrimination, as well as collect and review data on the reported incidents related to harassment and discrimination prohibited by the *Ontario Human Rights Code*. In this capacity, I have witnessed the following (in the reporting year 2019-2020):

- The highest number of reported complaints fell within the Code ground of **Disability** (29.3%), which decreased from 38% in the previous reporting year.
- Complaints based on **Race/Colour** represented 15.5%, which decreased from 30% the previous year.
- Complaints pertaining to **Religion or Creed** increased to 13.8% from 12% in the previous year.
- There was a significant increase in complaints in the categories of **Ethnic Origin/Ancestry and Citizenship**, which constituted 17.2%, compared to 10.2% reported in the previous year (YRDSB 2019-2020 Annual Report).

### **How a Human Rights Framework Intersects with Other Anti-Oppressions Frameworks**

The United Nations (2020) defines human rights as “rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion and any other status” (United Nations, 2020). In Canada, human rights are protected by the Canadian Constitution of 1867, as well as federal, provincial, and territorial legislation (Human Rights in Canada, 2021). Exercising human rights is a deliberate, participatory practice that empowers individuals, groups, and communities through fostering knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Human rights education addresses basic rights and broadens the respect for the dignity and freedom of all people and "shapes our understanding of the practices and processes which have evolved into a meaningful constellation of scholarship, policy, curricular reform, and pedagogy” (Bajaj, 2011).

Human rights education is only one avenue in achieving racial equity. I propose that this education must work in cooperation with other anti-oppression frameworks to further promote the urgency for developing tools for inclusion, diversity, and social justice. For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to focus on two anti-oppressive frameworks: anti-racist education and decolonizing education.

Anti-racist education means:

- teaching lessons that go in depth about communities of colour;
- learning about oppression and ways in which students can advocate for themselves;
- giving students opportunities to read books about communities of colour, where there is representation from the communities in which they associate with, to help strengthen their awareness and understanding of social identities; and
- encouraging students to use their voice for collective action, which can lead to engagement, empowerment and sense of belonging

Decolonizing education means:

- removal of colonialist thought and Eurocentric Western Imperial epistemologies in educational policies and practices;
- creating spaces and resources for dialogue where all students can participate;
- centering non-dominant voices;
- helping racialized students to see and connect with their identities, histories, and experiences; and
- embedding knowledge of multiple ontologies and epistemologies into the curriculum to inform part of the knowledge base.

Incorporating a Human Rights lens means focusing on:

- building relationships and fostering a community of social and cultural inclusion;
- active and participatory citizenship, engagement, expressing voice, and taking action;
- making legal language more accessible;
- fostering attitudes of tolerance, respect, solidarity, and responsibility;
- developing skills for protecting all students' human rights.

By positioning human rights as a foundation for anti-racist and decolonial pedagogy, students will learn about their country's history and its connection with the rest of the world. Teachers can better understand racialized students and can appropriately incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into classroom practices. Teachers can also discuss moral and legal rights

associated with policies and decision-making (Courey & LePage, 2013).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This future dissertation research will utilize an ethnographic, qualitative methodology while incorporating an autoethnography, as well as narratives of school leaders. I plan to use a variety of qualitative data collection methods, including discussions, interviews with school and system leaders, as well as document and policy analysis. Rooted in the principles of human dignity, fairness, equality, and justice, this study will incorporate a human rights framework in terms of empowering others to know and claim their rights while holding individuals and institutions accountable for respecting, protecting, and fulfilling those rights. The works of key scholars will be used, including Monisha Bajaj (2011), Anja Mihr (2014) and Michael N. Barnett (2020) for their analysis of human rights issues of both contemporary and future importance, the challenges of human rights as an ideology and the tensions between humanitarianism and human rights. Next, I intend to employ a decolonizing theory as a pedagogical tool to question, inform, and push against the persistence of colonial schooling. The works of key scholars will include Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007), Anibal Quijano (2007), and Walter D. Mignolo (2007) for their contributions to disrupting colonial and settler-colonial logic and for providing a means for eliminating the notion that Western epistemologies and ontologies are universal. Finally, my data analysis will be conducted through a critical race theory (CRT) framework, thereby demystifying racial stereotypes, racial inequities, sexism, classism, and xenophobia. Derived from American law schools, tying in issues of power, race, and racism to address colour blindness, CRT argues that ignoring racial differences maintains and perpetuates the status quo. The works of Kimberlé Crenshaw (2011), Patricia Hill Collins (2009), Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), bell hooks (2018), Derrick Bell (1970), and Richard Delgado (1991) will be used for their significant contributions



in examining the relationship between power and culture, challenging the status quo, and demonstrating how White supremacy continues to exist in organizational structures, practices, policies, and societal laws. Collectively, I have chosen these particular frameworks as they have great potential to confront and dismantle systemic barriers to equity embedded in systems, policies, attitudes, and practices that contribute to discrimination.

### **Critical Praxis: Moving Theory to Action**

Critical praxis involves a constant path of evaluating thought with action, and theory with practice. Moving from theory to practice, I offer suggestions for striving toward meaningful and lasting change.

### **Leadership**

Leaders play a pivotal role in a student's social, emotional, and academic well-being and provide the conditions and processes for students to succeed or fail. They also hold great power in transforming educational institutions. Leaders must understand themselves and their own racial location and identity (Carr & Lund, 2009; Evans, 2007; Solomon, 2002; Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). They need to learn how to change racist norms and understand how these practices impact racialized students (Davis & Armstrong, 2012). Leaders need to create a climate where culture is welcomed. They must be intentional about making space for other ways of knowing, being, and doing. Finally, leaders must model the change that they want to see (Davis & Armstrong, 2012).

Some recommendations for leaders include:

- engaging in critical self-reflection to gauge biases and perceptions;
- acknowledging their own racial location and biases, and admitting their own gaps in knowledge;
- providing space and time for staff to engage in difficult conversations;
- engaging in active listening and open dialogue;

- reviewing policies and practices that have an impact on racialized students; and
- reporting, monitoring, and tracking data to help understand where progress is being made and where the deficiencies lie.

### **Teachers, Teaching Practices, Curriculum & Pedagogy**

Some recommendations for teachers include:

- engaging in critical self-reflection;
- challenging deficit thinking that maintains and reproduces injustices;
- challenging biases in parent-teacher engagements;
- focusing on cultural competence and racial awareness, which requires a recognition that there are multiple ways of perceiving reality;
- considering alternate forms of learning - sharing circles, story-telling, photo essays, performances, and reflective writing;
- teachers themselves should first become aware of the injustices in Canadian history on Indigenous peoples, then be honest with students about the truth that was omitted from the Canadian curriculum, such as the broken treaty promises, the stolen land, and residential schools.

### **Partnerships**

Developing partnerships between all educational stakeholders, including parents, educators, staff, and community is key. While schools have a vital role in their capacity to manage change, it must be supported by collaborative engagement and alignment with communities. Some recommendations include:

- actively seeking out opportunities for cultural dialogue with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Community- Based partners;
- co-planing school events with parents and community members, such as move nights or heritage nights;
- surveying the Community on what they would like to see in schools and developing a shared plan with stakeholders.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have examined how racism in K-8 schools persists through the preservation of deeply entrenched systemic policies and practices. In doing so, I have attempted

to highlight the pivotal role of all educational stakeholders, with a particular focus on leaders, in meeting their obligations and responsibilities in upholding human rights in schools. I have proposed utilizing a human rights framework as one pathway for achieving racial justice. When combined with other anti-oppressive frameworks, human rights frameworks act as a springboard to further promote the urgency for developing tools for inclusion, diversity, and social justice. Using critical race theory as one of the key instruments to combat racial inequities and intersectionalities of identities, CRT binds issues of power, race, and racism, and demands that race and colour be recognized (Tate, 1997).

Through my combined work experiences in the United Nations, law firms, and the school board's human rights office, and addressing matters of harassment and discrimination based on the *Human Rights Code's* grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and other markers of identity, my focus has always been the advancement of marginalized populations and creating space for the vulnerable and disadvantaged through including spaces for voice, for dialogue, and for action. This mission coupled with my educational exposure to theories, concepts, and literature on the purpose of schooling and the evolution of leadership, made me realize that promoting human rights principles requires school leaders to grab the reins of transformative change. Through their moral and legal obligations, school leaders are responsible and accountable for upholding human rights in schools. They must advocate for changes to harmful school practices, use inclusive language, ensure that equity, anti-racism, social justice, and culturally relevant materials are embedded in professional development training initiatives, create spaces to have respectful and reciprocal dialogue, and ensure that all students are heard and feel welcome. Collectively, these responsibilities contribute to building the tools necessary to create a bias-aware, equitable, and inclusive school environment - where

human dignity is positioned at the centre of student success.

I see the path to a prosperous educational future as one that requires innovation, where people and relationships are valued over economics; where there is co-construction and collaboration on the revamping of oppressive policies; where equity is not an afterthought but is woven into the fabric of education; where respect, fairness, and inclusivity is part of all that we are, and all that we do; and where we do not just learn about diversity, but we live it. As educators, researchers and leaders, we must ask ourselves: what can we do in our individual and collective capacities to carry the message of human rights forward?

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